

VOICES FROM THE WOODS

LIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF NON-TIMBER FOREST WORKERS

Beverly A. Brown and Agueda Marín-Hernández

Editors



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JEFFERSON CENTER FOR EDUCATION AND RESEARCH, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, provides a multicultural forum for the discussion and analysis of issues among low-income people seeking a just and democratic future. We focus on topics in the Pacific West that are 1) structural to the economy and culture of the region, 2) multicultural, 3) gender-inclusive, 4) environmentally sound, and 5) emerging issues of importance to low-income and other marginalized people.

For additional copies, contact

JEFFERSON CENTER

POB 279 Wolf Creek OR 97497

541-955-9705 jeffctr@internetcds.com

This booklet is also available in Spanish.

Unless otherwise noted, all photos are from the Jefferson Center archives.

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It was our intention to retain the original "voice" of the people interviewed when the interviews were condensed, and we edited to keep each speaker's sequence and full context intact. In some cases, slight changes in diction were made to improve clarity and make the interviews easier to read.

Layout and production were carried out by Miranda J. Black, with assistance from Beverly A. Brown.

Editors were Beverly A. Brown and Agueda Marín-Hernández.



This book would not have been possible without the hard work, dedication, and generous contributions from the forest workers and harvesters whose stories are included here. They deserve the primary credit for the success of this project. Thank you all.

INTRODUCTION

STARTING A CONVERSATION

Agueda Marín-Hernández
1998-99 Program Director, Jefferson Center

Who are the Pacific Northwest non-timber forest workers, what do they do, and what do they think about forest management? These were the main questions the Jefferson Center posed as a point of departure for this document. We recognize, as do the workers themselves, that little is known about people working in labor-based occupations in the woods. They truly constitute an “invisible workforce.”

Workers’ invisibility and lack of recognition limit people’s participation in the public policy decision-making process. Policies defined without a clear understanding—or even worse, with misinformation about this crucial set of on-the-ground worker stakeholders—are not comprehensive enough and therefore may not address the real issues surrounding forest work.

BEGIN WITH THE PEOPLE

A few academic essays and sensationalized newspaper articles have been written about non-timber forest workers, but the literature was lacking something from the workers themselves. The Jefferson Center decided to conduct an oral history project so that other people, including people involved in forest management issues, could hear the actual voices of forest workers relating their experiences in the woods. Drawing on five years of networking, we interviewed workers who talked about where they came from, what circumstances brought them to the woods, what their experiences have been and what they see in the future. This booklet is the result of that process. We hope it will contribute to the understanding of the forest workers and their issues as well as the industry in general. It attempts to add an important piece of the overall puzzle, so we all can better understand the complexities of forest issues in the Pacific Northwest.

This project focused on non-timber forest work, and included tasks related to treeplanting, brush picking, mushroom harvesting and medicinal herb gathering, among others.

“NON-TIMBER” FOREST CONTRACT LABOR

A treeplanter is the person who carries a big sack of seedlings on his or her back, goes to the land where a timber harvest or a

big burn has taken place, and—snow, hail, rain or shine, in the remotest parts of the mountains—does the replanting. He or she is typically an employee of a contractor who has won a reforestation bid with the Forest Service or other public land-management agency, or a private timber company. Treeplanters may also thin trees, pile brush, or any other number of activities in the woods.

NON-TIMBER FOREST PRODUCTS

Non-timber forest products harvesters usually work alone, or with a friend or family group, as “independent” workers. A brush



picker goes into a natural or plantation forest to gather wild floral greens—ferns, huckleberry branches, salal and other species. Brush harvesters purchase harvesting permits from public or private landowners, or their permitted representatives (“leaseholders”), and sell what they harvest to companies who box and ship floral greens on the international market. A mushroom picker waits for the right season at the right place to harvest a wide variety of wild mushrooms, which might be anywhere between the Yukon and northern California. A gatherer of medicinal herbs walks miles into the woods to find the appropriate herbs, then struggles between maintaining high quality, protecting the microenvironment, and still finding enough quantity that will sat-

isfy the buyers, because buying companies may only want to deal with a certain volume. Medicinal herb gatherers may harvest for personal use, to make tinctures and other products to sell small scale, or sell to large herbal supply or pharmaceuticals companies.

DIVERSITY IN PEOPLES AND PERSPECTIVES

All these non-timber workers are mobile workers, because they have to move from one place to another, following the seasons in order to do their job. Mobility is an inherent part of the non-timber forest work industry, and that applies to everyone, regardless of cultural background. Because people come from different countries of the world and different areas within a region, it is a workforce with great ethnic diversity. Our interviewees included people from many backgrounds and types of work—that is why there is a diversity of opinions in these oral histories. This diversity shows the complexities of the issues and the fact that there are no easy answers. It also shows biases from different sides, which is entirely to be expected and does not diminish the importance and validity of the narratives.

COMMON GOALS, DIFFERENT CHALLENGES

The interviews show that whether people come from near or far away, or are from European-American, Native American, Latino or Southeast Asian heritage, all forest workers strive for what any one of us would want: to provide their families with a decent life. They all want to fulfill basic needs by having better working conditions and some kind of job security while feeling safe in the woods. The struggle and the goals are the same for everyone. The nature of the struggle is what varies, because different sets of people occupy different positions of power in society, be it because of their ethnic background or their class background or simply because of where they live, rural or urban areas.

A WORKFORCE ACROSS OCCUPATIONS

Many workers alternate between agriculture and forestry according to the seasons. For instance, Latino workers, once the

apple harvesting season in eastern Washington is over, they go to the brush picking in the western part of the state, then travel back to eastern Washington again for the pruning season and so forth. These two important industries in the Pacific Northwest rely on the same workforce. They are treated by industry, community development groups, and community activists, however, as two separate worlds. The efforts to improve the working conditions of both industries, as well as the institution and implementation of policies, deal with workers one industry at a time, as a fragmented labor force. That does not necessarily reflect reality. Coordination of efforts, sharing of resources and experiences, and merging allies could be tremendously beneficial to improve the overall conditions of both industries.

SEEING OUR WAY TOWARDS CHANGE

The non-timber forest products industry is physically very demanding. The physical stamina required for treeplanting, for example, has been compared to the endurance needed for marathon runners. Issues of age are important, since many workers lose stamina after a certain number of years. When asked about consequences of these strenuous efforts, most workers, regardless of the ethnic background say, “That’s why we are here, to work.” There is a pervasive attitude of resignation, an internalized realization that that’s how the industry works, and “Nothing can be done about it.” This attitude presents an important challenge to community-based organizations, advocates, and individuals who make efforts to improve the conditions of the industry, trying to make it better for everyone involved.

This booklet gives the reader these and many other perspectives as a general overview of the non-timber forest work industry, and how it is perceived by the workers on the ground: their struggles, their stories, their dreams. We hope that these stories can be useful to harvesters, policy makers, researchers, social activists, and all those interested in the industry. The Jefferson Center does not pretend to portray a full picture of the industry, but instead a contribution to the understanding of the not-yet-recognized non-timber forest workers in the Pacific Northwest.