



A comparative study of the legal and grey wild product supply chains



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ABSTRACT

Wild product picking in most cases is considered as a backward activity that cannot be associated with important macro or micro level gains. However, significant amount of research shows otherwise – illustrating how wild products support local communities and can become to be a noteworthy economic sector. The contradiction between forest product perception and opportunities these products offer often causes inappropriate forest product governance. In this article wild blueberry picking in Latvia is analysed. The wild product sector has grown significantly during the last decade in Latvia. However, despite the growth the sector remains almost unregulated. The article analyses two types of supply chains that have emerged due to lack of government presence and illustrates possibilities for community both supply chain types offer.

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1. Introduction

The term “non-timber forest products” (NTFP) covers a wide range of products. Researchers have found it difficult to agree on a common meaning of this concept due to the ambiguity between timber and non-timber products, questions over the spatial borders of forests, the diversity of stakeholders and their interests and experiences, and the evolving nature of the concept (Ahenkan and Boon, 2011, 2). In this article the term designates the group of edible non-cultivated products that grow in the wild.

Edible wild product picking, along with hunting, is probably the oldest method of human food provisioning (Lee and Daly, 1999) but in recent history it has been outcompeted by controlled forms of food production (Pryor, 2005; Levetin and McMahon, 2011, 177–186) – the domestication of wild species and more recently the distribution of the food supply through agr-food systems. Over the centuries domesticated agriculture has moved towards ever greater efficiency through technological and social innovations that have often resulted in large scale monocultures and capitalist agriculture (Tauger, 2010; Bernstein, 2014; Lang, 2003). The stability of food supply promised by this cultivation has led these systems to outcompete other possible food supply options and in many cases has led its competitors to be represented as archaic, inefficient and incapable of supplying a sufficient amount of food to

feed a growing population.

Despite wild product picking declining in significance, it has continued to exist as marginal practice. While some academics and policy makers have continued to have an interest in wild product picking, it has for the most part remained in the shadows of more ‘promising’ development paths. That has changed somewhat in recent years as the growing critique of the existing food system has contributed to the ‘rediscovery’ of wild products and communities living on them. Yet this newly re-emerging interest was mainly focused on developing countries (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) 1995), typically in the Global South, and more precisely, those communities living in rural territories that maintain a lifestyle that ties them to nature (ibid.).

Despite this, there is evidence that in Western countries the collection of some wild products has evolved into a significant economic activity. One example is the wild blueberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), which has become popular in the North of Europe in recent decades, especially in the Baltic states. Estimates suggest that several thousand tons of wild blueberries are picked annually in these states local communities earn significant sums of money through this activity. While there are relatively few studies that assess wild product industries in developed countries and the few studies that are publicly available are often very broad in scope and lacking in detail (see Murray and Simcox, 2003; Paassilta et al., 2009), it is reasonable to assume that the wild product sector in Western countries shares at least some of the problems identified in the Global South. Because the wild food sector is frequently

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overlooked and because of the difficulties in introducing appropriate regulation for these chains, it might be that issues such as equal power distribution, equal access to resources, ecological impacts of supply chain are even more pronounced than in conventional sectors.

This article analyses wild blueberry supply chains in Latvia. In the article two secondary goals are pursued: first, the article analyses how governance models specific to wild products result in specific supply chain practices. Second, it analyses how the practices that dominate the sector shape local communities' opportunities to benefit from wild products.

This article starts with a theoretical analysis of governance models. It argues that NTFP should be regarded as a complex sector and as such is best served by a participatory style of governance. The following section describes the methods used and other methodological issues related to the paper. This section is followed by a description of the current state of the art in NTFP research and the main findings regarding the governance of the sector. This section also includes an outline of regulations over NTFP in Latvia – which shows that weak state involvement has pushed the sector into a 'grey' economic status. The paper continues by describing blueberry picking in Latvia today and then outlines the research results relating to the development of supply chain paths; the internal organization of the supply chain and power relations. These sections show how enterprises organise the supply chains that surround them and how their relations with the state can influence the emergence of new forms of relations within the chain. Finally the main findings are summarised; these suggest that there are differences in access to power within this weakly regulated sector: in some cases power is shared by market actors and the state, while in others between market actors and the community.

2. Governance

Many researchers have described environment-related problems as “wicked” (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993a, 1993b; Frame and Brown, 2008) – as multi-level, multi-stakeholder and multi-dimensional problems (Hoppe and Wesselink, 2014) which can only be solved through an integrated participatory approach. The notion that many current problems are complex provides a strong reason to go beyond relying on government as the sole actor involved in implementing nature protection or solving nature related problems. When other actors participate in environmental governance the priorities change and participatory and multi-level governance permits more inclusive solutions (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006). However, the style of governance is strongly related to how a problem is framed (Hoppe and Wesselink, 2014). All forms of governance require the recognition of an existing problem and complex and participatory governance requires recognition of a problem's complexity.

Recent decades have seen an ever greater involvement of various stakeholders in all levels of governance. This reflects theoretical expectations that good governance involves collaboration with market and civic actors (Franks and Cleaver, 2007). Each policy domain has introduced its own specific policy network that incorporates commonly used resources and practices (Hoppe and Wesselink, 2014). Usually the state remains a central actor, introducing issues and moderating the dialogue between actors and maintaining legitimacy to introduce rules that are compulsory for everybody. Yet problem framing does play a decisive role in determining the relations between the stakeholders (Hoppe and Wesselink, 2014). Thus, an 'issue' that is not framed as such will probably not be regulated while issues that are framed as simple will be dealt with without initiating practices that take complexity into account.

In most cases we would expect the state to take the central role in organising the relationships between those actors invited to participate in the governance of an issue. However, as in the example used in this paper, an issue that is not politically framed remains unnoticed. The theoretical literature describes this as the state opting out of governing (van Waarden, 2012). Either scenario significantly influences the main practices within a sector (ibid).

According to some authors a lack of consumer trust should undermine unregulated sectors (van Waarden, 2012). However, those actors remaining in the sector might also attempt to regulate the sector themselves. Frans van Waarden offers three possible governance models that might occur in such a situation: the role of governance could be taken up by independent commercial information providers and certifiers; the sector could self-regulate through informal communities and more formal networks of civic actors; or it could self-regulate through formal associations and rigid hierarchies (ibid.). The purpose of all these solutions is to ensure a level of trust among the actors operating in the sector and the continued existence of the sector.

However there is an obvious problem with self-organization and that is the lack of delegated legitimacy and authority since none of the stakeholders hold any real rights to power in the sector. For market actors the power they can mobilize to regulate the sector generally originates in the supply chains (Bernstein and Cashore, 2007). Yet there can be other sources of power. Although the rules set by the market or other non-state actors can be institutionalised as commonly accepted practices, none of the actors by themselves will have the instruments to acquire legitimacy. Such systems would be threatened by sudden power shifts, changes of thoughts by the actors involved, or their opting-out of the system. Moreover, while private governance institutions might have some positive characteristics there are studies that illustrate that such an organization of governance might not be bound to act according to common interests or be perceived as just (McDermott, 2013). The blueberry sector in Latvia faces many such issues.

3. Methodology

This article compares two wild blueberry supply chains. The term 'supply chain' refers to actor networks that ensure the flow of produce from the forest to the secondary processors located around a specific berry-dealing enterprise. This definition reflects the goals of the article. Two of the biggest Latvian wild blueberry enterprises are located in the centre of the chains. One is a legal enterprise that follows national regulations and actively communicates with the state. The second is a grey enterprise that avoids communication with the state and breaches regulations.

The main actors involved in this chain are blueberry pickers (people who collect berries and sell them to blueberry collectors), blueberry collectors (or collecting points – points which buy berries from pickers and sell them on to dealers) and dealers (the enterprise that buys from networks of collectors). There are other actors involved in the supply chains, including drivers and people who sort the produce and who work in blueberry freezing facilities. However, these groups are not included in the analysis as they are relatively few compared to the pickers and collectors; the role of these groups is similar to that played in other, more conventional, supply chains.

The data used in this article was obtained during the GLAMUR¹ project. The data was gathered in several waves from late 2013 until early 2015. Originally the data was been gathered with two goals in

¹ GLAMUR – “Global and local food assessment: a multidimensional performance-based approach”, a EU FP7 project.

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