

# Social Values of Specialty Forest Products to Rural Communities<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Rural communities have long been known for their cultural distinctiveness, independent spirits, and, unfortunately, comparatively high poverty rates. A look at the promotion of Specialty Forest Products (SFP) as a rural development strategy against the backdrop of larger social trends such as welfare reform and economic restructuring suggests the need to ask hard questions about the value of SFP to residents of rural communities.

Field work in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and review of the literature highlight three categories of social values for SFP: livelihood, cultural, and recreational. Livelihood values are derived from both non-market and market uses. Cultural values include the continued ability to observe special practices and transfer knowledge from one generation to another. Recreational values combine the peace and pleasure of being outdoors with a practical and useful activity. These values are not mutually exclusive, however, and SFP may meet multiple needs for an individual at any given moment and over the course of a lifetime.

In fact, the key social value of SFP is the flexibility and diversity of functions they can perform. SFP serve as a reserve or supplemental livelihood strategy for rural residents who knew how to use them and where to find them. Gathering is also an enduring way of marking the passage of the seasons. These values are qualitatively and quantitatively different from those that are captured in standard macroeconomic calculations and suggest a note of caution for rural development programs. The paper concludes with historic and contemporary examples of SFP values for rural residents.

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## Introduction

Rural communities have long been known for their cultural distinctiveness, independent spirits, and, unfortunately, comparatively high poverty rates. Because many of these communities are located in or near forests, specialty forest products (SFP) are increasingly looked to as potential economic opportunities by organizations concerned with rural development. SFP have obvious appeal as potential sources of income where industrial-scale resource extraction is increasingly untenable and other formal employment opportunities are chronically erratic. However, rural development projects based on SFP will not be implemented in a blank landscape. In many places SFP already have important historic and contemporary uses. An understanding of these is necessary if SFP projects are to avoid displacing existing social values and meet the goal of improving rural well being.

In response to that need, this paper explores the social values of SFP to rural communities and the potential impacts of large-scale commercialization on those values. Through a case study of a rural region of the United States, I discuss the ways that SFP are used by rural residents and the social relationships that are characteristic of their use. Based on this analysis, the international literature, and examples drawn from the

US Pacific Northwest, I examine the record of large-scale commercialization's effects on existing social values of SFP. I conclude with cautionary notes for the promotion of rural development projects.

## Social Values of Specialty Forest Products

The social values of SFP reflect the realities of rural economies and cultures. For better than a century, booms and busts in resource-extraction industries have swollen and shrunk local communities. Timber and mining have provided high-wage but unstable jobs for only a limited portion of the population during the best of times (Freudenburg and Fricke 1994; Tickamyer and Duncan 1990). More recently, economic restructuring has led to the growth of employment in the service sector in many rural communities (e.g., tourism, consumer services such as catalog sales). Jobs in these industries are generally low-wage and are often seasonal and/or part-time.

Consequently, rural communities have long and extensive experience with the realities of economic fluctuations. Many residents migrate to areas that appear to offer greater formal employment opportunities. Others remain and pursue a set of material and cultural strategies that permit them to survive chronic financial shortfalls and uncertainty. To understand how people put together a living in such uncertain

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Economic history and anthropology suggest a view that looks beyond the formal market and individual actors to a more inclusive definition of economic activity (Gudeman 1986; Halperin 1988; Hart 1986; McGuire, Smith, and Martin 1986; Smith and Wallerstein 1992). From this perspective the economy is constituted by any undertaking that provides the material means for human existence (Polanyi 1977). People endeavor to assure their survival and meet their needs<sup>3</sup> by pursuing a variety of what are termed livelihood strategies. These include both activities in the formal and informal markets -- such as wage labor, barter, and petty commodity production and sale -- and nonmarket activities -- subsistence activities and gifts, for example.

In this conceptualization of economic activity, households are the relevant economic unit. As a social species, humans create groups, or households, to pool their resources and ensure the survival of their members. At any given time, most households will derive livelihood resources from multiple individuals and strategies. The mix of livelihood strategies pursued by a household varies with its demographic composition and economic conditions. This mix of strategies at any one time and over the course of time may be thought of as 'livelihood diversity.'

The informal economy literature documents the reality of livelihood diversity in urban settings throughout the world (Mingione 1994; Portes, Castells, and Benton 1989; Roberts 1994; Smith 1994). A smaller body of work has begun to explore the diverse strategies that rural households in the United States use to secure their survival and the role of location in natural resource-rich areas in those efforts (Dick 1996; Glass, Muth, and Flewelling 1990; Jensen, Cornwell, and Findeis 1995; More, Glass, and Zwick 1993; Tickamyer and Duncan 1990). Read together, these literatures point to four important characteristics of diverse livelihoods: 1) the often critical role of subsistence goods; 2) the importance of even small amounts of cash income for poor households; 3) the primacy of culture and social relationships in structuring and regulating much economic activity; and 4) the critical advantage of flexibility for surviving economic change.

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<sup>3</sup> As they perceive and define them.

Peninsula (UP) indicates that this perspective is necessary to see the social values of SFP to rural communities (Emery 1998)<sup>4</sup>. SFP may contribute to community economies through factors such as local business revenue. However, their values are forged first at the level of households working to meet their needs in highly variable economic conditions, using the physical and social resources at their disposal. As such, SFP have obvious livelihood values, but also as important as cultural and recreational activities. Although discussed separately below, these values are not mutually exclusive and, indeed, are often inseparable.

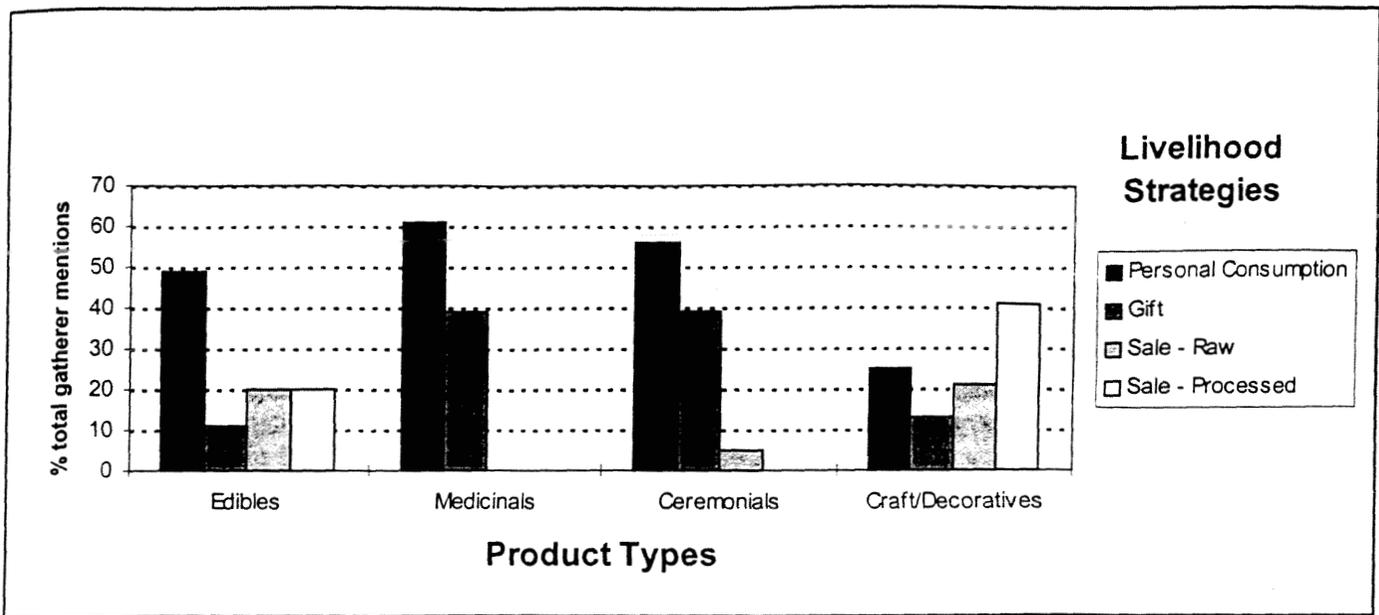
### Livelihood Value

SFP contribute to household livelihoods in the UP through both nonmarket and market strategies. Nonmarket strategies include subsistence activities for direct personal consumption and gifts. Sale of raw products and products processed into crafts or foodstuffs comprise market uses. More than half (60%) of the livelihood value of SFP to UP households comes from nonmarket uses. As Figure 1 illustrates there are significant differences in the patterns of livelihood use for various types of SFP. Both edibles and products used for crafts and decoratives contribute through all four livelihood strategies. However, the relative proportion of market and nonmarket values are virtually mirror images of each other: personal consumption and gifts account for 60% of all mentions of edibles while sale in both raw and processed forms constitute 62% of crafts/decoratives mentions. By contrast, UP households use medicinals and ceremonials almost exclusively for their nonmarket values.

From this breakdown of livelihood values it is clear that edible, medicinal, and ceremonial products are especially important for their ability to provide subsistence benefits while products used for crafts and decoratives are important as sources of cash income. Not surprisingly, there are some differences in the SFP livelihood strategies used most heavily by various demographic groups. The women whom I interviewed mentioned 40% more nonmarket uses than did the

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<sup>4</sup> This analysis draws on over 400 hours of interviews with gatherers (people who remove SFP from the woods), buyers (those who buy raw product), and regulators (representatives of public land management agencies and large private landowners in the UP). Livelihood use data reflect information for 43 households that include at least one gatherer.



**Figure 1.** Upper Peninsula gatherers use specialty forest products as both nonmarket (personal consumption and gift) and market (sale in raw and processed forms) livelihood strategies. However, the relative importance of these livelihood uses varies with product type. Edibles, medicinals, and ceremonials are most heavily used as nonmarket strategies. Craft/decorative products are the most frequent source of cash income, although edibles are also gathered for market uses.

men. For gatherers 60 years of age and older, 80% of uses were nonmarket as compared to 58% for people between the ages of 20 and 60 years.

Knowing *when* people use SFP as a livelihood strategy is as important to understanding their social values as knowing how they are used. In general SFP function as supplements and/or a kind of livelihood insurance. They are mobilized as needed to bridge regular gaps between income and need, particularly by older people living on social security and households relying on seasonal and/or part-time employment. SFP livelihood values are also important when there is a financial emergency or catastrophic downturn in household economies, such as the need for vehicle repairs or loss of a job. At such times, subsistence uses can be critical and even small amounts of cash income can be very important to a household. SFP are also available as a livelihood strategy for people whose access to employment is limited by factors such as age, gender, and disability. However, because return to labor and time spent gathering are rarely equal to even the minimum wage, SFP tend to be displaced as a livelihood strategy for individuals who can secure a job.

### Cultural Values

Gathering is not exclusively an activity of economic desperation, however. SFP also have important

cultural values. For Native Americans in particular, but also for many rural European Americans, gathering is an enduring way of marking the passage of the seasons and acquiring culturally important goods. SFP cultural values include traditional foodstuffs and craft materials. Several of the 138 products harvested by UP gatherers have ceremonial uses for which substitutes may not be available on the market. Further, the very process of gathering these products according to cultural norms may be an important part of their ceremonial value.

As with many cultural practices, SFP may have long-term value as survival strategies even when they do not meet urgent material needs. Gifts, for example, are critical in building and maintaining social networks that may be called upon in times of need. They are also a way of redistributing livelihood resources to individuals such as the very young and old, who cannot provide for themselves. Because gathering is most frequently done in intergenerational groups, it creates opportunities for older family members to pass on information that is vital to the continued observation of special practices and the maintenance of cultural identity. This knowledge transfer is also a way of ensuring that SFP livelihood values will be available to the next generation if they should be needed.

## Recreational Values

SFP gathering is also valued by rural residents as a recreational opportunity. It is an activity that is readily available to people who live in and near forests. For most products, hands and common household articles are the only equipment needed. Thus, time and the cost of transportation are the primary investments required, making gathering a recreational option for rural residents virtually irrespective of their financial resources. While gathering can be physically vigorous, it is also an activity in which people of all ages can participate in various capacities. Unlike hunting and fishing (which do require an investment in equipment), I found no strong gender division associated with gathering. Indeed, a majority of the people I interviewed reported gathering in mixed gender groups.

Many gatherers spoke to me of the pleasure of being in the woods and of sharing the time with family members. They clearly valued the opportunity to 'be close to nature' and observe old traditions. They also valued the immediately useful results of gathering, as well as the ability to exercise and pass on livelihood skills. On several occasions, I asked people if they gathered primarily for pleasure or for livelihood benefits. In every case, the response indicated that these values were inseparable for them. The combination of the two was at the heart of gathering's appeal.

## Social Values and Processes of SFP Microenterprises

While nonmarket uses are reported more frequently by UP gatherers, microenterprises are critical to the availability of SFP as a potential source of cash

income for those who need it. The production and sale of crafts and foodstuffs (e.g., jams, jellies, and baked goods) is an ongoing source of income for some. For others, harvesting and processing SFP for small local businesses is critical. Gatherers report using this income in emergencies brought on by events such as the sudden loss of a job. It also helps people get through regular shortfalls in cash resources that accompany seasonal and low-wage employment.

One example is a second-generation business that manufactures grave blankets (Figure 2)<sup>5</sup>. In 1995, approximately 80 people supplied the business with evergreen boughs. Roughly 50 piece workers assembled them into grave blankets at their places of residence. The owners of the business indicate that the most important factor in assuring a supply of boughs and people to process them is good social relationships. Although their business activity is concentrated in the fall, they stay in touch throughout the year with people who cut and assemble for them. Conversations with both gatherers and the business owners indicate how important respect and reciprocity are in these relationships. By occasionally buying boughs when they are not needed, and maintaining long-term commitments to assemblers, the buyers are able to call and ask for more cut boughs or assembled blankets than folks might otherwise choose to produce. This is critical to operations since harvesters and assemblers alike are functioning as independent contractors and particularly value the ability to work when they like for as long as they like. In addition, they almost universally exhibit satisficing behavior. Harvesters and assemblers usually have a fixed earnings goal<sup>6</sup> for the activity. Once this goal is

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<sup>5</sup> Grave blankets are panels of evergreen boughs that are often placed on graves in the lower Midwest during the winter, when low temperatures and moderate snowfall make cemeteries rather brown and dreary.

<sup>6</sup> \$300 - \$500 was the range of most frequently indicated goals.

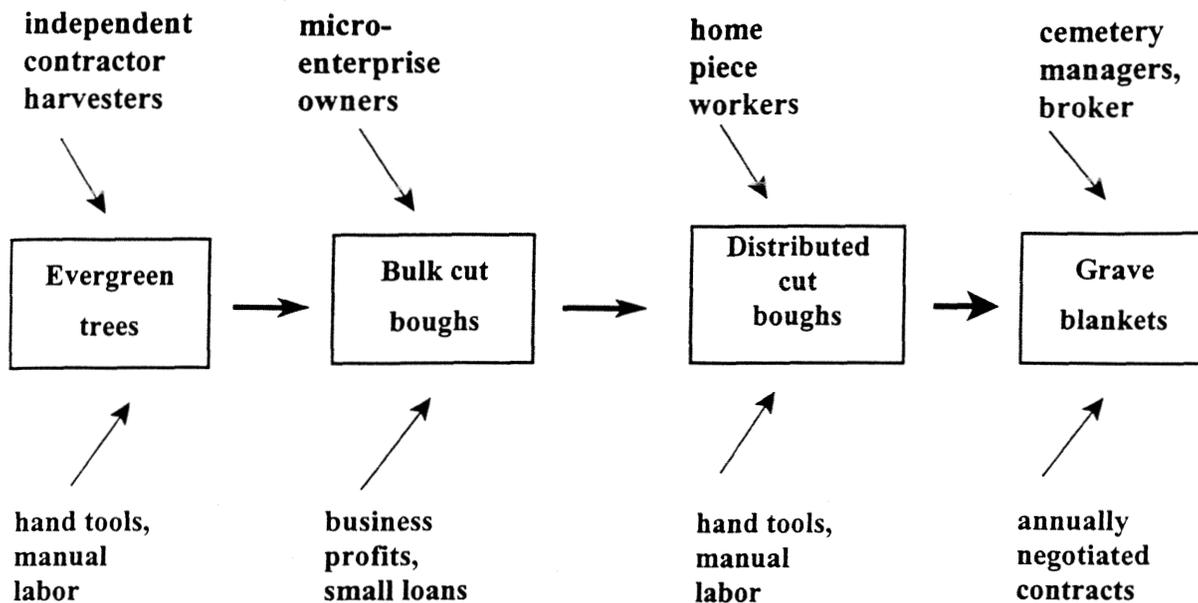


Figure 2. This microenterprises' owners rely on social relationships characterized by respect and reciprocity to ensure bought supply, assembly labor, and dependable grave blankets orders. Gatherers, buyers, and assemblers alike exhibit satisficing behavior.

reached, they stop.

Social relationships and satisficing are also important in shaping the distribution end of this business. Because contracts for grave blankets are negotiated on an annual basis, the business owners work hard at meeting the needs and expectations of the floral broker and cemetery managers who buy from them. To do so requires that they know these individuals well and maintain a high level of personal control over the production and delivery process. Since the business goal is to survive with modest profits, the owners report that they have turned down potential orders rather than extend themselves beyond what they know they can provide on a high-quality basis year after year. Such behavior is possible in part, however, because the business is lightly capitalized. With no special investment in heavy equipment or facilities, the owners are able to operate with profits from previous years and small, short-term loans from local banks.

### Flexibility – SFP's Key Social Value

The UP case study confirms what the international literature suggests (Arnold 1995; Falconer 1996; Falconer and Arnold 1991), that the key social value of SFP is flexibility and the diversity of functions that they can perform. Where people have access to products and the knowledge of how to harvest and use them, SFP serve as vital reserve or supplemental

livelihood strategies. Both products and the act of gathering help sustain cultural practices for many rural groups. Similarly, gathering is a simultaneously pleasurable and productive recreational activity. While I found that rural residents of all socioeconomic levels appreciate these values, they are especially important options for population segments with limited financial resources and/or access to employment.

### Impact of Large-Scale SFP Commercialization

Both the international literature (Almeida 1996; Homma 1996) and experience in the US Pacific Northwest (Davis 1977; Hansis 1998; Love et al. 1992; McLain, Christensen, and Shannon 1998; McLain and Jones 1997; Molina et al. 1993; Pilz and Molina 1996; Richards 1997; Schlosser and Blatner 1995) demonstrate the impact that large-scale commercialization of SFP can have on social values. Businesses that make large capital investments and incur significant long-term debt must respond to a different set of needs and pressures than those facing microenterprises. Their financial goals and requirements are predictably greater, as are their social and ecological impacts. The more product a business can or must acquire, the more will be harvested in areas within profitable transport distance. As supplies dwindle and/or competition for them increases, businesses will look for ways to gain control of and assure access to product. Where this involves

strategies for obtaining exclusive right to products on public lands or other previously *de facto* open access lands<sup>7</sup>, it quite obviously and by design restricts the access of gatherers who may have used that area in the past for both subsistence and cash-generating activities.

Often, however, labor is the greatest limiting factor for SFP supply and highly capitalized businesses show a tendency to take qualitatively different approaches to labor in order to satisfy their quantitatively greater needs. Independent-contractor gatherers' work is motivated by their own needs and desires, which may not conform to those of a business. To ensure a more steady supply on a desired schedule, businesses that have grown to the point where intensive personal relationships are not possible may hire day or other wage laborers, often transporting them considerable distances. Again by design, these individuals have less control over the terms and processes of their work than do independent contractors. They may also bring very different ecological knowledge bases and long-term motivations than do people who have lived for long periods of time in the area where they are harvesting<sup>8</sup>. If it is cheaper to acquire product through this type of labor process it is likely to replace some or all of the income opportunity for independent contractors.

Finally, wildcrafted SFP are particularly susceptible to booms and busts in the market. Wild mushrooms provide a stark example. Their prices may vary on a daily or even more frequent basis, with factors affecting their price including the vagaries of their biological availability at places throughout the world and the state of the Asian economy (Blatner and Alexander 1998). As the history of taxol and the Pacific Yew demonstrates (Foster 1995; Vance 1997), where a large market is established but wild SFP costs are high and/or supply is in doubt, heavily capitalized businesses that are dependent on SFP input tend to respond in at least a couple of ways. They may seek out alternative or synthetic substitutes or pursue efforts to cultivate the product widely. If these efforts are successful, the market for wild product may

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<sup>7</sup> In the UP, most SFP on private industrial forest lands appear to be effectively common property resources provided gatherers do not enter active timber harvest areas or pose obvious liability risks.

<sup>8</sup> Although it should also be noted that new arrivals can be very quick studies and there is no guaranteed correspondence between length of residence and/or exposure to an area and knowledge of its ecology.

disappear as would income opportunities for the people who had gathered it.

## Conclusion

In short, large-scale commercialization can reduce the flexibility of SFP as a livelihood strategy and limit rural community access to gathering as a cultural and recreational opportunity. These effects fall most heavily on those with the least financial resources because they have limited income opportunities and cannot pay for substitute goods or activities. This suggests the need for caution in promoting SFP as a rural development strategy. Particular attention should be given to the scale and intensity of markets and to the labor-capital relations used to produce and move SFP to them. While a large-scale business may produce short-term gains in the ledger sheets of rural towns and counties, they may also reduce the social values of SFP to the members of rural communities most in need of assistance.

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