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Biography - Marla has been studying the role of NTFP in the lives and livelihoods of the people who gather them since 1995. In Michigan's Upper Peninsula she conducted the first comprehensive study of U.S. NTFP. She is currently looking at the impact of land use and land ownership change on NTFP use in New England. Publications include papers and book chapters on the social values of NTFP, their role in household economies, local ecological knowledge and stewardship practices of gatherers, and the history of NTFP use in northeastern North America.

Wild Plants and All Our Other Relations: The Ethics of Using, Developing, and Managing Nontimber Forest Products

Human beings have probably been using NTFPs for as long as people and forests have existed in the same places. But something is changing. Today, more people are interested in NTFPs than have been for several decades, at least. Also, different kinds of people are interested for different types of reasons. I would like to contribute to the discussion of the future of NTFPs by sharing what I have learned from the dozens of people who have been kind enough to invite me into their kitchens and take me out into the woods of the northeastern United States and tell me about what they gather and what it means in their lives. Their lessons have much to teach us about the relationships that have made NTFPs work in the past and can help guide our actions in the future.

In the case of NTFPs, I believe that there are two kinds of important relationships: the relationships between people and plants and the relationships between people and people. The importance of relationships between people and plants is clear from the fact that many cultures, disciplines, spiritual and intellectual traditions have developed rules to guide those relationships. In more than six years of research, I have been struck by the similarities between the harvesting rules observed by conscientious gatherers, conservation-oriented field guides, and esteemed scientists like Nancy Turner. All clearly have similar intents – to promote a relationship between the gatherer, the act of gathering, and the plant materials being gathered that ensures the survival of both.

One of the things we often overlook when we talk about conservation of NTFP species or their potential as economic development opportunities are the relationships between people, the social relationships, that are at the heart of the way NTFPs are harvested and used. Yet the relationships between people, the rules that we set up to govern those relationships, and the way that we organize the economics of gathering have direct and profound impacts on both the social and ecological results of NTFP use. For that reason, I'm going to talk at greater length about four types of social relationships surrounding NTFPs.

1) *Preserving and Transferring Knowledge* - Knowledge is shared through social interactions. There is a respectable body of scientific knowledge about NTFPs that we share through the written word in books, papers, and on the Internet. By far the greatest store of knowledge about NTFPs exists in people who gather and use them. The most common way of sharing NTFP knowledge is through older people teaching

younger members of their families and communities. This hands-on method also imparts information on how to survive in a particular place and helps to ensure cultural as well as physical survival.

2) *Terms of Access to NTFPs* - Another key set of social relationships are the arrangements we make to allow or prohibit people from obtaining and using NTFPs. These may be informal or traditional agreements, formal laws or statutes. Permit systems are formal ways that access to NTFPs is controlled on public lands. Permits can affect access to NTFPs in at least three ways. a) The price of a permit may put an income filter on who can legally gather an NTFP. b) The place(s) where gathering is allowed influences who has access to NTFPs. c) Any season that is established obviously affects when people may have legal access.

3) *Conditions of Labor* - Traditionally, gathering has been a flexible activity that fits in with other work and responsibilities. Within the boundaries of plant seasons, people decide when they go out, for how long, how they work, and when they stop. However, we can create social relationships that reduce or eliminate this control. For example, if permit or lease prices are set too high for the people who actually do the gathering, they will be bought by others who are then in a position to make those kinds of decisions about the way the work gets done. If their interests are different from a gatherer's, they are likely to make different decisions about things like what weather people work in, how long they work, the tools and techniques that get used, and how much gets harvested. People for whom the flexibility is important -- women with small children, the elderly, people with disabilities -- are likely to be left out of such arrangements.

4) *Distribution of Benefits* - Throughout the world and throughout history, cultures have developed systems for distributing the benefits of various NTFPs. In the central Himalayas, the fallen leaves and thin green branches of trees in community forests were traditionally reserved for widows. Nancy Turner's research in the Pacific Northwest shows that although families and tribal groups had their own NTFP patches and territories, they often shared with others who were suffering from a shortage. For the last century or so, in the United States NTFPs have been a resource for those who have been left behind by the market economy and/or are struggling to maintain special cultural practices. Changes in the terms of access and conditions of labor will likely lead to changes in the distribution of benefits from NTFPs.

Clearly, today, in the United States the kinds of relationships we cultivate with plants and between people will determine the social and ecological affects of NTFP usage, development, and management. The lessons from my own research and that of others, but most importantly the experience of gatherers, suggests an ethical compass for charting our future actions. In terms of NTFPs, an ethical relationship is one that consciously promotes the survival and even the thriving of both people and plants, especially the most vulnerable. Of course, this isn't an easy proposition and there will be times that the welfare of people and plants or the welfare of different groups of people will appear to be in conflict. We will still have to make hard decisions and engage in some vigorous negotiations with each other. But as we do so, we can check with this compass to be sure we that are tending in the right direction.