

Foreword

In the mid-1980s, I lived in the Peruvian Amazon and conducted research on the native fruits of the region. My work was focused primarily on the ecology and sustainable harvesting of three forest taxa, but I also interacted quite a bit with local collectors, middlemen, and vendors in the sprawling Belen market of Iquitos. The great majority of the fruits sold in the Iquitos market during those years were wild harvested. In trying to figure out where all of this material was coming from, I discovered several interesting things about the local fruit trade. Ribereño communities upriver knew the location and fruiting times of wild populations of all the commercial fruit species in the vicinity; they visited these populations every year and harvested commercial quantities of fruit, they figured out ways to get the fruit to market, they haggled with buyers about the price, and they usually made some money doing this.

Forest fruits were still characterised as minor forest products at this point in time, but to many of the villagers that I worked with along the Ucayali River, these non-timber forest products (NTFPs) were very important to their livelihood, by no means minor. I wrote a couple of papers about the ecology and management of forest fruits in the Peruvian Amazon and even published a comment about the relative economic value of non-timber resources in a prestigious scientific journal (Peters et al. 1989). One might say that I was one of the early adopters in the NTFP sector.

And then the momentum started to build, and NTFPs became a cause célèbre, and fruits, and nuts, and latex, and indigenous people, and rubber tappers started appearing everywhere. Through it all, there seemed to be an unstated assumption that somehow the NTFP acronym – as well as the people that collect them and the markets through which they are sold – represented a distinct and relatively homogenous category of products and processes. Things got confusing. Is the fragrant heartwood of the *Aquilaria* tree, obtained by tree felling in the Asian tropics, a timber or a non-timber resource? Is palizada, the pole-sized stems logged commercially from the Selva Maya for use in house construction, an NTFP?

Subsequent research that I have conducted in other parts of the world have consistently highlighted the differences, rather than the similarities, in the ways that communities collect, manage, and market NTFPs. In some cases, the collection of NTFPs provides a reliable source of income, plays an important cultural role in the community, and offers a convincing reason to keep forests as forests, rather than converting them to pastures, oil palm plantations or estate crops. At the other extreme, some communities exploit NTFPs to the point of depletion, are enslaved by compromises to local markets, or are impoverished by existing regulations governing the collection and sale of these resources. In spite of how much one might want NTFPs to be a predictable, well-defined commodity group, there is actually a great amount of contextual chaos associated with these resources. This does not negate the potential of NTFPs but certainly does argue against blanket prescriptions and standardised governance.

There are as many different NTFP systems as there are non-timber forest products. The Peruvian case was my first peek behind the curtain of this wonderful people and plants show. Every interaction between a community and an NTFP, the positive ones as well as the negative ones, can teach participants, researchers, and onlookers something about sustainable resource use. The editors of the present volume are to be congratulated for embracing this diversity and for weaving together the many dimensions of NTFPs into such a comprehensive, informative overview.

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Reference

Peters CM, Gentry A, Mendelsohn R (1989) Valuation of a tropical forest in Peruvian Amazonia. *Nature* 339:655–657