

Gastronomy – why back to nature, why now and for how long?

An exploratory study into to the renaissance of foraging.

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Key words: Foraging, Responsibility, Sustainability

Abstract

The recent renaissance in foraging motivated the author to examine the variety of underlying aspects which may play a role in the “Foraging Boom”, and the question of sustainability going forward. It was felt that the most appropriate way to gather data, was an in depth review and evaluation of the literature, unearthing a wealth of information in due course. The research highlighted many positive aspects associated with foraging with the only negative point discovered relating to sustainability should the increase in foraging activities continue. Only responsible foraging will guarantee the existence of wild edible plants for future generations.

Introduction

Foraging has undergone an unprecedented renaissance around the globe in the last number of years with an exceptional number of related events taking place in Ireland since 2011.

Foraging, the collecting of wild plants such as leaves, nuts, mushrooms and fruits as food, is a necessity for survival even in the animal kingdom⁽¹⁾. With an increasing number of restaurants around the world and in Ireland making use of foraged foods, the author of this paper felt the necessity to investigate this phenomenon. The research objectives were defined as follows:

- identify and review literature on the meaning and history of foraging in a human context
- investigate the drivers of the recent popularity of foraging
- compare and contrast the positive and negative issues associated with foraging with a focus on sustainability

Methodology

A comprehensive review of literature has been carried out on foraging which formed the basis of this secondary research paper. It was not possible to get specific

quantitative data on many of the aspects relating to this study; therefore a mainly qualitative methodology was adapted, while conducting this research.

Discussion

As previously stated, foraging is a necessity for survival even in the animal kingdom ⁽¹⁾. The same was vital for humans during the Palaeolithic period, depending on their success as Hunter Gatherers. Following the above period, agriculture needs to be put into perspective with a 10-meter-long timeline starting with the earliest ancestors of man, about fifteen million years ago. Fleischhauer ⁽²⁾ states that the cultivation of plants if placed on that scale would only occupy the last seven millimetres, demonstrating the extremely long history of foraging, with Irving ⁽¹⁾ sharing that same opinion. Foraging changed from a necessity for many to a hobby of only a few during the nineteen eighties. Continuous economic growth, globalization and oversupply of goods starting throughout that time, changed the attitude to foraging from sustaining oneself to something which was looked up on as something dirty. With that the knowledge of wild edible plants passed from generation to generation over thousands of years started to be lost ⁽²⁾. Though the authors research established, that this is not the case in times of food shortage such as war or in today's lesser developed countries, where foraging still plays a major part in human survival and nutrition according to Redžić ⁽³⁾ and Malek, et al. ⁽⁴⁾.

In the above context it is interesting to note, that at the first signs of the worldwide recession in 2008 the pocketsize book 'Food for Free' first published in 1972 by Richard Mabey tripled in sales. The same trend is reflected by the amount of new books available on foraging, and the increasing number of articles in newspapers (Figure 1) and journals, indicate the growing demand for publications on the subject.

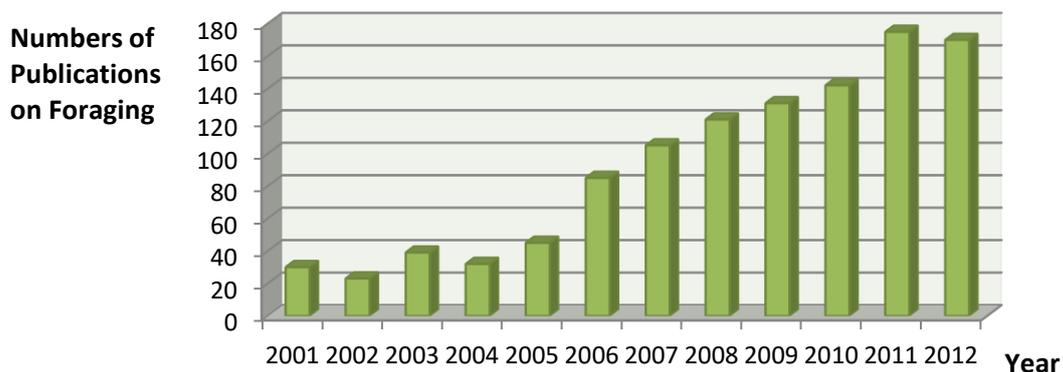


Figure 1. Increase in publications on foraging ⁽⁵⁾

The all around the clock oversupply of mass manufactured and far travelled exotic foods is common place in today's supermarkets ⁽⁶⁾. As the appetite for foreign fruit and vegetables is satisfied as well as the overwhelming offer of mass and force produced edible goods remains; the search for different, new and unusual products continues. Ashley et al. ⁽⁷⁾ have found that people are also using food to distinguish themselves from others as a sign of class and status, and in the search for new tastes, wild locally foraged foods could be a way to do just that in the opinion of the.

At the same time consumers becoming more aware of the environment and a large number of food scandals have affected consumer confidence considerably over the last few years⁽⁸⁾.

With words like 'Personal Carbon Food Print' being part of the everyday language, Stein⁽⁹⁾ suggests that 'the greenest form of feeding yourself' is foraging, which should appeal to an increasingly environmental conscious population.

Grieve⁽¹⁰⁾ and Daley⁽¹¹⁾ on the other hand mention that consumers want to be able to connect with their food and its origin more than ever before.

Connie Green a lifetime forager in California and supplier of wild foods to some of the best restaurants expresses her view on foraging as 'this primal drive to be resourceful' that 'satisfies something ancient in us', which is reflected by Irving⁽¹⁾ 'I realized that all of us were about the same primeval business: foraging for food' which he uses in the context of humans and animals alike.

The rawness and natural state of the wild plants not contaminated with chemicals and additives like most supermarket foods⁽¹²⁾, is possibly one of the biggest single drivers feeding into the leading and long lasting current trend, the search for health and wellbeing.

Many Chefs have only rediscovered the use of wild edible plants in the last number of years. As the knowledge about foraging had almost disappeared, these wild foods started fetching high prices and were sold to restaurants as a premium product. The high prices were passed on to consumer, turning something supposedly free like wild foods into something exclusive⁽²⁾.

Quite a number of publications especially those of experts in the field^(1; 5) are pointing out that sustainability and responsible foraging are of utmost importance.

The author questions if their advice is being heard. Only in 2010 René Redzepi head chef of the now famous restaurant "Noma" was 'accused of illegally picking mushrooms' in London⁽¹³⁾.

The increase in foraging activities is alarming. Numerous organizations and state bodies especially in the US and the UK are warning that nature will not be able to deal with this massive onslaught of people if it is going to persist⁽¹⁴⁾.

As Cleary⁽¹⁵⁾ fuels the foraging boom in Ireland with her publication 'The city where the wild things are', New York is trying to deal with the problem of people stripping anything wild and edible from Central Park⁽¹⁶⁾.

It is not only the extensive gathering of nature's food which gives reasons for major concern; it is also the overharvesting of medicinal plants throughout the world as pointed out by Roberson⁽¹⁷⁾ and Schultz⁽¹⁸⁾.

Even though the research was not able to determine or pinpoint one single factor responsible for the recent renaissance of foraging, it highlighted a large variety of drivers which are emphasising the positive aspects associated with foraged foods such as:

- foraging for wild foods is part of the genetic makeup, ingrained into humans over millions of years
- a reduction in distance between food source and consumer is positive for the environment
- the closeness between the consumer and food creates a rich and on-going relationship with land and heritage

- a balanced nutritional content of wild plants is good for a healthy diet
- foraging is very much part of Irish history, as in times of food shortage such as the famine, it would have been possibly the only way to guarantee survival

The sustainability of foraging is the only controversial but extremely important issue discovered by the author of this study, with the heavy promotion of gathering wild edible plants standing in stark contrast to the basic survival of many of these species. In regard to health there is a strong argument to be made in favour of a diet partially consisting of wild edible foraged foods based on the nutritional composition alone, but as the population of the globe exceeds seven billion and the use of foraged plants (be it as food or medicine) continues to increase, the question arises how sustainable is foraging into the future.

Conclusion

If the existing trend and the promotion of foraging continue at its current pace, the required amount of wild plants will endanger the basic survival of many of these species.

One possible way forward, may be to cultivate some of the plants, which in due course will cause them to lose some of the properties they had in the wild.

The solution to a healthy diet therefore cannot be a constant increase in foraging, but the responsible use of resources.

As high profile chefs and the media promote the consumption of foraged foods around the world and in Ireland, they also need to take the responsibility up on themselves to increase awareness with regard to sustainability. Only responsible foraging will guarantee the existence of wild edible plants for future generations.

There is great potential to widen the research into a scientific sustainability study of wild edible plants.

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