

The certification of wild plant collection

Heiko Schindler

Wild plant collection refers to the collection of medicinal and aromatic plants from their natural habitats. This activity needs to be carried out carefully as it can put pressure on the local resources. Growing populations, the conversion of land to agriculture and a high international demand for some species, can easily lead to habitat losses and to a complete depletion of these resources. This article presents the current situation of different wild plant collection projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina. These follow the “Organic” and “FairWild” certification schemes of the Institute of Market Ecology (IMO), an international third party certification body.

The main purpose of certifying the collection of wild crops is to show that collection does not endanger the ecosystem, and that the stability of the plant population or the ecosystem is not threatened. Organic wild plants only refer to those which grow naturally (without any agricultural interventions) and which come from a clearly defined collection area. One of the most important aspects of this process is a traceability system which allows the tracking of a product from its collection area to the place where it is consumed. For this to work, all activities, from the collection area to the sale of the products, need to be documented in detail. This guarantees that the organic quality of the product is maintained.

The collection of wild plants in Bosnia-Herzegovina

As a result of the recent war in the former Yugoslavia, the population of Bosnia-Herzegovina faces immense problems. Agriculture is mostly limited to subsistence farming, and faces many challenges: cultivation requires access to farm land. The landless, poorest and economically marginalised sections of the population are unable to practice agriculture, but can collect wild plants.

IMO is working with six wild collection companies in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some of them collect only medicinal and aromatic plants, others collect these and also forest fruits and mushrooms. The companies are located according to their main collection activities: the companies that mainly concentrate on medicinal and aromatic plants are found closer to the Adriatic coast. This region boasts a vast diversity of plants with medicinal properties; the most important of which are *Helichrysum italicum*, *Salvia officinalis*, *Vitex agnus-castus*, *Satureja montana* and others. The Mediterranean climate and the high intensity of sunlight helps to produce products of very good quality. Collectors can go directly from their villages, such as Tupanari or Udbina, into the surrounding hills and mountains, or they are transported by the companies to the collection areas. They go out in small groups and collect plants, when the temperature is pleasant, and work according to their own schedule.

The collectors who also collect forest fruits, or the plants that grow abundantly in meadows, are organised in a similar way. They collect in groups, because there is plenty to collect. In contrast, the collection of mushrooms can be different, as some of the commercially interesting mushrooms do not grow abundantly. The most valuable mushrooms are the ones that do not grow everywhere, but only in special locations. So there are groups of collectors who collect mushrooms together, but often one collector will not want to share his knowledge with others because they would compete with him.

Advantages

Each collector has a contract with the wild collection company, which guarantees him or her additional security. Altogether, about 3000 collectors and family members currently benefit from the IMO organic certification in Bosnia-Herzegovina. They appreciate the additional security which they get through having the contract, as for some of them this is the only source of income. The main advantage of being certified as organic is that each collector can receive a higher price for his or her efforts. But there are rules concerning the sustainability of the collected plants, and the collectors are trained in these rules and collection methods. They must always, for example, leave a certain percentage of the plants they find in the wild in order to ensure sustainability. No endangered plant species can be collected, while actions that lead to habitat destruction or soil erosion are not allowed.

Collectors also use the wild medicinal plants for themselves. This is especially important in remote villages where there is no doctor. One old woman in the Vlasenica collection area says that she has never seen a doctor in her life. She has always used her own herbal medicine and is able to live from wild collected forest plants and mushrooms. Many collectors of mushrooms eat these mushrooms themselves, because they know about the high quality of this “meat of the forest”.

Wild collection also benefits nature conservation, because it means that local people have more respect for their natural resources when these natural resources also generate money for many people. Another positive aspect is the conservation of knowledge: young people get to know to the collected plants and their uses, and even if they are not themselves involved in collecting they learn about the traditions of collecting herbs and mushrooms in Bosnia.

A new certification scheme

In 2007, two of the IMO certified wild collection companies in Bosnia-Herzegovina also became certified under the “FairWild” certification programme. “FairWild” introduces a market mechanism which is equal to that of fair traded coffee, tea or chocolate. This concept requires that within one year of certification the collectors set up a democratic structure which represents them. It also guarantees that collectors and workers enjoy exceptional working conditions.

An additional benefit of this certification is that it demonstrates that there is no discrimination against particular groups of society or women in the collection process, and that child labour is avoided. It shows that the customary rights of the local community are recognised and respected. “FairWild” ensures collectors and workers a fair price and allows for social community development through the availability of a FairTrade premium fund. The FairWild certification scheme also obliges the buyers of certified products to establish long-term business relations with their FairTrade suppliers, which include transparent trade agreements, some kind of prepayment, guaranteed purchase of certified goods and payment of fair prices as well as a FairTrade premium. IMO is currently supporting and implementing FairWild in Russia, Kazakhstan and East Africa.

Heiko Schindler, Institute for Marketecology (IMO), Weststr. 51, CH - 8570 Weinfelden, Switzerland. E-mail: hs@imo.ch ; <http://www.imo.ch>