Weaving Sustainability Into A Cooperative Network

By Christina Johnson

ABSTRACT: Trinity Alps Botanicals (“TAB”), incorporated as a non profit agricultural cooperative in 1993, buys, processes and sells medicinal herb products that are organically grown or ethically wildcrafted from both public and private lands. In order to have long term access to these plants and to better insure sustainability, TAB has chosen to collaborate and cooperate with local Native Americans, land managers, other local medicinal herb businesses, and regional forest based practitioner and advocacy groups, including migrant workers. We believe that, with a cooperative business structure, a collaborative philosophy, and an educational component, TAB has a better chance of success in building a sustainable economy utilizing Non-Timber Forest Products.

Trinity County: Home Of Trinity Alps Botanicals

Trinity County, located in rural northern California, is larger in size than either Delaware or Rhode Island, with a population of less than 15,000. Eighty percent of the total land base of Trinity County is public land. Like many timber-dependent communities, Trinity County has a declining economy: 20% of our population has income below the poverty level; approximately 16% are unemployed.

In 1991, Trinity County was awarded a grant by the U.S. Department of Agriculture under the Forest Service’s Economic Diversification Study Program. The goal of the “Trinity Project”, as it was then called, was to determine the feasibility of producing commercial volumes of Non-Timber Forest Products. Many participants of the Trinity Project incorporated in 1993 as Trinity Alps Botanicals, a non-profit agricultural cooperative.

TAB buys, processes and sells medicinal herb products ethically wildcrafted from both public and private lands or organically grown. Value-added products with our label are currently on retail shelves.

Trinity Alps Botanicals Vision

*To enable and encourage natural healing by providing quality medicinal herbal products.

*To protect the environment by only sustainably hand wildcrafting and organically growing medicinal herbs.

*To develop employment opportunities for people in local forest dependent communities.

A Cooperative Concept

Cooperation Within the Cooperative

At the time TAB incorporated in 1993, we didn’t understand all the implications of being a cooperative, although we did understand a cooperative’s basic concept. All members of the cooperative are owners of the business. This is a key to economic development in our area. The people who choose to live in the rural communities in Trinity County tend to be extremely independent and have little desire or motivation to work for someone else. All cooperative members are invested in and cooperate to insure the success of our business.

Cooperation Outside of the Cooperative

TAB has learned that, in order to insure long term access to Non-Timber Forest Products (“NTFPs”), to harvest them ethically and successfully build a business that is dependent on these resources, the stakeholders in the forest need to be identified. Once identified, a working relationship with these stakeholders needs to be established.

The Stakeholders

The stakeholders we have identified are local Native Americans, the USFS, other local and regional forest based practitioner groups, community members including wildcrafters and growers, as well as migrant workers, academics, and the public at large.

Building Trust

In order to build alliances and foster cooperation among the stakeholders, trust must be carefully built and nurtured. In some cases this can take many years. Some of the ways Trinity Alps Botanicals has attempted to include stakeholders, understand their

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issues, learn from each other, and gain mutual respect follows.

**Collaborative Strategies – Local, Regional And National**

**Local Collaboration**

**Local Non-Timber Forest Products Collaboration**

In cooperation with local people, an academic now teaching at Humboldt State University began a project about five years ago to bring together all the local stakeholders in NTFPs to identify issues and strategies and to be proactive with our valuable resources. In collaboration with Trinity Alps Botanicals and other local groups, three annual NTFP workshops have been held. Each of these workshops brought together wildcrafters, USFS personnel, academics, Native Americans, business people and experts from the region. Meetings were held recently between four local groups that are producing medicinal herb products to see how we can help each other and work together.

**Tribal Gatherers Working Group**

Trinity Alps Botanicals attends meetings of the Tribal Gatherers Working Group. This is a local group that was formed of representatives from each of the six tribes located in our region in response to the concern over commercial harvest of traditionally used plants. What is unusual about this group is that the representatives are gatherers and forest workers themselves, not the tribal governments. This group established quantity limits for annual harvest of each plant for each Ranger District in the Six Rivers National Forest. This is a big step towards insuring sustainable commercial harvests of the plants concerned.

**Land Stewardship for Non-Timber Forest Products**

Besides gaining access to public lands in the usual way through the permit process, Trinity Alps Botanicals is experimenting with land stewardship. After years of a working relationship and establishing trust, our local District Ranger asked TAB to submit a proposal to manage some public land for the Non-Timber Forest Products in which we are interested. In partnership with the Tsnungwe Tribe and the USFS, Trinity Alps Botanicals has submitted a proposal to manage 1000 acres of public land in the Six Rivers National Forest for a period of 10 years. As the land proposed is within the traditional gathering area of the Tsnungwe, they have generations of experience in managing this land. TAB’s goal is to improve the ecosystem to encourage and support medicinal plant growth.

**Regional Collaboration**

**Collaborative Learning Circle**

Since 1992, Trinity Alps Botanicals has been a member of the Collaborative Learning Circle (“CLC”). Funded by the Ford Foundation, the Circle is composed of representatives of nine regional forest practitioner groups. The CLC meets not less than four times each year. We have spent time getting to know each other’s work, and have goals of peer training and reducing repetition of activities, including competition for funding. For Trinity Alps Botanicals, membership in the CLC has proven to be of great value. One of the most exciting projects undertaken by the CLC was to take two field trips to other regions. We took a three day trip to Oregon and a four day trip to Washington State. On these trips were representatives from each of the member groups, as well as local and regional USFS personnel that were interested in being educated on NTFP issues. We visited successful herb operations and met with local people interested in Non-Timber Forest Products’ issues. This was a valuable way to network with people in other regions with similar challenges in regards to NTFPs, as well as strengthening established relationships with USFS personnel.

**Alliance of Forest Workers and Harvesters**

The Alliance of Forest Workers and Harvesters of Washington, Oregon and California is a multicultural group of Native Americans, Southeast Asians, Latinos and European Americans. The Alliance is a group formed in response to the tension and violence that has erupted in the past as a result of disputes over rights for Non-Timber Forest Products. For example, many Native Americans feel there should be no commercial harvest of medicinal herbs, mushrooms or any of the plant materials that have been traditionally used by Native Americans. Southeast Asians, fleeing from desperate conditions in their countries, have limited options for employment. They often suffer from language limitations. Harvesting mushrooms or other NTFPs is one of the only means of survival for these people. For many generations Latino people have been doing migrant forest work and harvesting NTFPs. Many European American forest workers who have worked all their lives harvesting NTFPs are now finding these resources in short supply. The Alliance of Forest Workers and Harvesters was formed to increase communication across these cultural and language barriers. Members get together about four
times a year, rotating meeting places between Washington, California, and Oregon. We use translators and translation equipment so that we can communicate in two or three languages. We find that when we can understand each other’s struggles and concerns, we can start working together towards solutions.

**National Collaboration**

Trinity Alps Botanicals has been involved with the Communities Committee of the Seventh American Forest Congress, the National Network of Forest Practitioners, American Forests, and the Forest Stewardship Council. TAB also attends national level meetings such as this one in order to network and learn from people from other regions facing similar challenges.

**Education, Sustainability, Good Business**

Education is an essential component in developing a sustainable economy. We need to educate wildcrafters about sustainable harvest techniques, as well as educate the market as to our cooperative organization and sustainable harvest methods. TAB has developed its publication, *Standards and Guidelines for Harvest of Selected Medicinal-Use Non-Timber Forest Products* for our wildcrafters. TAB trains each wildcrafter, developing a relationship with him or her, and requires proof of adherence to our standards and guidelines. As this is a very competitive market, and in order to distinguish ourselves in the marketplace, TAB has published promotional materials that outline our methods and ethics. There is a growing percentage of the market that is interested in supporting businesses promoting the sustainable and ethical harvest of medicinal herbs.

**Cooperation, Sustainability, Survival**

Trinity Alps Botanicals believes that we need to cooperate both within our organization and outside our cooperative, with other stakeholders. We need to educate our wildcrafters and markets on what sustainable and ethical harvest is. We will then be in a position to be able to provide jobs and hope to our impoverished communities, reducing tensions with other stakeholders, and protecting our valuable natural resources. Our goals remain to provide quality medicine that will be of benefit in helping heal the people, while using only methods of obtaining this medicine that contribute to the healing of the earth.