Using Resource Inventories to Determine the Potential for Non-Timber Forest Product Production

John Krantz, Shelby G. Jones

ABSTRACT: Non-timber forest products can be almost anything and are limited only by the innovation of the crafter. Nearly any tree or shrub species could be recognized for a specific trait or set of characteristics which make it desirable for a specific product. This paper will focus on the first step in assessing an area for NTFP potential, and provide, a step-by-step process for inventoring for NTFPs.

Introduction

Even though this workshop is dealing with agroforestry crops, the progression of landowners into these endeavors is most likely initiated through wildcrafting of naturally produced materials. Whether the landowners wish to collect and market non-timber products themselves, sell trespass rights for collection by others, or sell to full-time producers, they must know what they are growing and selling. Because of the diversity of the marketplace for products, it is imperative that an organized approach be taken to determine precisely what is marketable and the quantities present. There is also the necessity of knowing quantities if questions of sustainability questions are to be addressed. Some type of inventory system is suggested.

Involve a Professional

Inventorying non-timber forest products is quite different from conventional timber inventory. One needs to consider more than just trees, which complicates matters significantly. Identification of all types of plant materials including ground cover, wildflowers, herbs, mushrooms, shrubs, and trees are generally beyond the ability of the average landowner. This is particularly true of someone who is attempting to market special forest products for the first time. For this reason, it is suggested that one or more professional resource manager be involved with the landowner for the first set of inventories.

Even professional resource managers may not be completely familiar with potential products, so landowners should participate in each inventory and not be hesitant to ask questions or suggest potential products. Remember, this field is only starting to evolve, so there are not many experts available to assist landowners. Hopefully, that situation will improve over the next few years.

Inventory Frequently

Many potential products are evident only at specific times of the year. Therefore, a single annual inventory may miss many potential products. It is the feeling of this author that a minimum of three inventories per year are necessary to identify the maximum diversity of products. Timing of these inventories are likely to vary somewhat in different parts of the country. In the Midwest, inventories are suggested in early Spring (soon after green up), in late summer, and again in the Fall. Multiple inventories will get landowners in the woods often enough to see products prior to being ready for harvest and allow for assessment of quantities of marketable products. This schedule is suggested for continuation for the first several years at least. Seasonal inventories are a key to good marketing!

What Does An Inventory Include?

Non-timber forest products should include fairly detailed information the first few years until owners become intimately familiar with where their products are located and when harvesting should be scheduled. It is handy to set up an inventory system that will lend itself to a database management system. This will be information worth keeping, so think about computerizing it from the beginning. A detailed map of the property is also helpful, particularly for noting locations of specific products. Inventory information should include the following:

Date: very important, don’t forget it
Persons involved: It is a good to know who is making the assessment.

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2MN Department of Natural Resources
3Consulting Forester, Forest Resource Advisory Services, LL C, Jefferson City, Missouri
Item: Details and the name of the potential products identified. Be specific.
Common name: This will probably be the name referred to buyers or producers.
Scientific name: This is the name that will truly identify the plant or organism. This may be completed following the field inventory if one is not familiar with scientific names. Collect specimens to make sure of ID. Landowners should learn to identify plants by scientific name.
Quantity of product observed: (Estimate) Use units that you understand and, hopefully, the most common unit used for that product in the trade. Example: pounds of seed, grams of pollen, # of stems or sticks for walking sticks, gallons of berries, etc.
Dimensions: How big is the maple burl? Shape? Diameter & length of log type products. Weight for burls, seed, edible nuts. Of walking sticks, square feet of bark, lineal feet of grapevines, etc.
Quality Assessment: This is subjective and will be improved if you know and understand buyers specifications for the products.

Presence of secondary products: Is there something else you can market after the primary product is harvested?
Location: Be specific and reference to the property map.
Estimated Harvest Date: This item may also be completed following the field survey.
Notes: anything else you think will be important to harvesters or buyers or to yourself.
Other Important Information: Are boundary lines marked? Does the landowner live on the property? If not, if there a resident manager? Contact information about the landowner? Access? Harvesting restrictions?

With this information the landowner can begin to assess real market possibilities, economics, time commitment and other personal considerations which will lead to a decision about becoming involved in a Special Forest Products enterprise.