



Photo: Naturpark Almenland



## Wild Forest Products in Europe: Seeing the forest around the trees

Wild forest products (WFPs) are vitally important for Europe's people and its economy. Used wisely they can help to bring about the necessary shift to a sustainable, smart and inclusive bio-based economy, a bioeconomy. They cover both the dimension of natural resources and materials, as well as being strongly connoted to the provision of ecosystem services, conservation, issues, traditional knowledge, cultural values, and the complex of drivers in the context of rural development.

The latest report on the state of Europe's forests revealed the total value of WFPs in the Forest Europe region to reach 2,27 billion Euro, of which 83% was generated by plant products. This represents around 10% of the value of roundwood, a considerable figure despite gaps in data collection and unaccounted WFPs.

Despite increasing evidence that WFPs constitute an important segment of forests' goods and services, their full potential needs to be better understood. This is especially true for regions where wood is not the most profitable product or in order to increase the socio-economic opportunities and competitiveness of rural economies.

Why is this important? In a bioeconomy based on natural resources, there is an increasing need to fully understand the spectrum of resources available, to identify their potential and niches, and to clarify rights of use, trade-offs and synergies among forest and land use forms.

WFPs are products other than wood derived from wild and semi-wild forests, as well as from sources in early stages of domestication, such as fruit trees, bushes, and orchards.

This definition covers a wide range of resources and products including plants, fungi, fauna and soil.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment report (2005) lists more than 150 WFP of importance within international trade, including forest fruits, mushrooms, cork, pine kernels, acorns, medicinal herbs, essential oils and chestnuts.

## Key messages

### ■ Wild forest products provide benefits for the development of rural areas and opportunities for greener lifestyles

In addition to formal markets, informal and non-market activities substantially contribute to livelihood and well-being, as well as maintaining local and regional identities, an important carrier of rural development.

There is an opportunity to strengthen the link between WFPs and current trends for organic products and nature-based solutions. Traditional products are prime for rediscovery and update in the light of a bioeconomy, while traditional lifestyles and subsistence economies could be maintained.

### ■ Improved understanding of WFP demand and production would offer fresh dimensions for marketed and non-marketed WFPs

WFP production, trade, and consumption is inadequately reported so the complete picture of WFPs in Europe is unknown. A WFP classification scheme is needed to respond to product diversity and new raw and processed product groups. Better knowledge of non-commercial picking and consumption habits would help forest owners.

Growing global demand for WFPs means that international trade is increasing, both as intra-trade flows within Europe and imports from outside. Future forest policies should consider enhancing production, so reducing international trade dependency while re-establishing an economic bridge between the WFP consumer and the producer located in remote rural areas.

### ■ Sustainable use of WFPs requires us to overcome institutional and regulatory fragmentation of WFP governance

WFP policies need support structures with adequate capacity to address the different aspects of a multifaceted WFP sector, including inventory, land management, harvesting, transportation, processing and trade. In most European countries, such institutional structures either do not exist, or lack power and resources.

The sustainable use of WFPs is strongly linked to a clear definition of ownership, access, and rights of use. Pure restriction instruments are not usually successful due to lack of implementation and means to control. Information, awareness-raising campaigns and developing pathways are required to negotiate conflicts between users and owners, and prevent negative effects on the forest ecosystem.

### ■ Innovation in wild forest products must go beyond sectoral boundaries

WFPs are strongly linked to traditions and traditional lifestyles. While this is an asset in itself, there is much to explore in terms of innovative production and marketing concepts in order for WFPs to be fully embedded in an innovation society.

For a comprehensive overview on the full dimension of WFPs, a multi-sectoral approach is required. Sectoral fragmentation is a major reason that WFPs remain invisible on the playground of natural resources in a bioeconomy.

### ■ Better forest management and marketing for wild forest products offers new value chain potential and a wealth of social ecosystem services

To unravel the potential of WFPs, optimised forest management concepts are needed to balance multiple claims on forests and forest resources. This requires new support tools and participatory forest management approaches.

Co-production and combined production in forests leads to coupled value chains for WFPs and sectors such as the food industry or tourism. In a multi-lateral bioeconomy, social effects such as the impacts of WFPs on human wellbeing need to be taken seriously, with increased recognition of the role of WFPs in outdoor activities, nature-based food and medicine, or social and educational purposes.

