

Rural Alternatives Project: *Cultural Skills & Community Woodlands*



Case study no. 6: Wild food in Sunart

Throughout the duration of the Sunart Rural Alternatives Project (RAP) there has been strong interest in wild food. This was clear from the first discussions with community members about the directions the project might take.

Wild food

Wild food captures people's interest for several reasons. It is deeply satisfying to go out into the woods with an empty basket and come back with the ingredients for a good meal; it gives people the motivation to get out into the woods and to learn more about the local flora and fauna; it's healthy; it's the ultimate way to get local, organic food; and it's free. Furthermore, some foraging for wild food is a traditional part of the crofting livelihood of the Sunart area, and there is interest in keeping old traditions and knowledge alive.



However, gathering wild food can also be very hard work. Filling a basket with wild mushrooms in a location you knew of ahead of time is easy and satisfying, but trying to put together enough edible greenery for a wild salad in the autumn can be very time-consuming.

Existing use of wild food in Sunart

Many local people in the Sunart area already use wild foods in their diet. The most commonly used are berries, particularly brambles, which are used for preserves and country wines. A lot of people also collect wild mushrooms, but this tends to be restricted to a few easily recognized species, in particular chanterelle (girolle).

Local restaurants use wild berries and mushrooms in season, which they buy from local collectors. This is usually on an informal basis with for example someone calling a restaurant to say they've found a good crop of chanterelle and would like to sell them on. As far as is known, nobody locally collects regularly as a significant part of their livelihood.

Sustainability and legal issues

Sustainability is unlikely to be a problem in this area even if someone were to set up as a forager. The area could not really support more than one or two individuals foraging for a livelihood, and as such there would be a strong incentive to treat the woods and their flora with respect.

The main legal issue would be access, as permission from the landowner would be required for commercial collecting. Much of the forested land in the Sunart area is owned by Forestry Commission Scotland and as such access should be readily negotiated, but large areas are also owned by private estates, some of which would be more open than others to foraging on their land.

Wild food activities organised by RAP

Wild food courses run by the project

Building on the interest shown, a number of courses focusing on wild foods were organized for in the Sunart area:

- A wild food cookery demonstration with local chef Gill Gosnie of Ardsheallach Lodge, Acharacle.
- Two wild fungi identification days with expert mycologist Graeme Walker.
- A Wild Food Weekend with Andy Fraser of Caledonian Wildfoods, which consisted of a day and a half foraging in the woods, followed by a Wild Food cookery demonstration and lunch with chef Andy Fox at the Whitehouse Restaurant, Lochaline.



A wild food stall was also organized at a local food fair in Acharacle, giving people the opportunity to taste some wild salads, nettle soup, and wild berry preserves and pickles for themselves.

The Wild Food Weekend in particular was a great success, with 23 participants – by far the highest number of attendees for any of the courses run at Sunart through this project.

New uses generated through the project

A young German couple moved into the area partway through the project and became very interested in wild food through coming on several of the RAP courses. They started to provide a lot of their own food through foraging, as well as supplying a few local cafes and restaurants, and were considering starting up a foraging business. However they were unfortunately obliged to return to Germany temporarily for personal reasons, and it is not clear when they will come back or what if any plans they have for developing a wild food business in the future.

The general feedback from participants in the courses clearly indicated that the courses provided through the project have given people the confidence to identify and prepare a wider range of wild foods than before. This applies in particular to fungi, which people tend to be very wary of until shown clear identification features by an acknowledged expert.

Future potential

The Sunart area has a number of excellent restaurants, most of which market themselves on their use of high-quality local produce. Enquiries with local chefs indicate that they are enthusiastic about wild ingredients, including some less well-known ones such as wild salads and greens, and would be ready to pay for them if they were locally available.



This enthusiasm for wild ingredients, and the growing interest in local and organic food, indicate that there may be potential for an enterprising individual to make foraging into a viable part-time business locally, at least during the tourist season.

It could also be possible for a local trainer to run foraging or wild food courses for both locals and visitors, which would combine identifying and gathering ingredients with learning how to prepare them. This might be supported as part of the

proposed Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Training Network. However, at present nobody is showing interest in taking this forward as a business.

Lessons learned

- The Wild Food Weekend was extremely successful, as it took participants right through the process, from where to look for and how to identify a particular species, to how to prepare it. It also made it clear how delicious wild food can be!
- If we had had access to a more locally based foraging 'expert' it would have been good to run a series of regular foraging sessions from spring through to autumn, allowing people to learn to identify the whole range of wild woodland foods available in the area throughout the year. This would have the advantage of keeping people motivated by bringing them out into the woods regularly, and might also have given a better sense of how viable a local foraging business might be by showing how the availability of different foods is distributed through the course of the year.

RESOURCES: USEFUL CONTACTS

- Andy Fraser, Caledonian Wildfoods, 0141 950 2412 andy@callywildfoods.com
- Graeme Walker, British Mycological Society, Graeme.walker@tinyworld.com

For further information about the Rural Alternatives Project, visit:
www.reforestingscotland.org/projects/rural_alternatives.php

For general information about non-timber forest products, visit: www.forestharvest.org.uk

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