Balsam Bough Harvesters in Northeastern Minnesota: Who are they and what motivates them?

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Issue

Harvesting of Non-timber Forest Products (NTFPs) such as balsam boughs is practiced in various regions of the United States and is a common activity in developing countries. Since it can be part of multiple-use management strategies, NTFP harvesting has been extensively researched internationally. In the United States research has focused on specific regions (Pacific Northwest, Appalachia, Northern Michigan). For northeastern Minnesota, we need a better understanding of how balsam bough harvesting contributes to individual's lifestyles and livelihoods.

Objectives

Little is known about balsam bough harvesters in northern Minnesota and how they use this NTFP in their lifestyle and livelihood strategies. This study was designed to:

- Document the experience of balsam bough harvesters in northern Minnesota
- Understand who they are and what motivates them

Balsam Fir (Abies balsamea)

Methods

Structured, open-ended interviews with 41 randomly selected permit holders for balsam harvesting on public lands in 2000, stratified by the four northern counties with the greatest number of permit holders (Beltrami, Itasca, Koochiching and St. Louis). Out of a total sample of 293 permit holders, 55 were contacted, 41 completed interviews, resulting in a 75% completion rate. The sample excludes households that harvested exclusively on private or tribal land, and those that harvested illegally.

During personal interviews, harvesters shared information about household demographics, balsam bough harvesting methods, motivations, preferences, and an evaluation of the resource. Interviews were conducted in their homes, harvesting sites, and ranged from 30-45 minutes. At the end, harvesters filled out a 1-page survey with closed and open-ended questions.

Demographics

Of the 41 harvesters interviewed, 83% were male and 17% female; 95% were Caucasian and 5% Native American. Ages ranged from 19 to 73 years, averaging 45 years. Sixty-six percent were married, 22% single, and 12% divorced. While a majority of the harvesters had children, only 44% had resident dependents. The average amount of time living in the region was 41 years (2 min, 73 max) years. Harvesters were almost equally divided between rural (51%) and urban areas (49%).

Balsam bough harvesting experience

The majority of harvesters were taught to pick balsam boughs by their families (37.5%), themselves (22.5%) or close friends (10%). The remainder were trained by industry representatives (22.5%); with only a few citing multiple sources (7.5%).

These individuals have been harvesting for many years, with an average of 13 years picking balsam bough. The majority have been picking for less than 10 years (58.6%) but a few have been involved for more than 50 years.
Results

What motivates harvesters?

Is it a livelihood strategy to secure economic well-being and meet long-term survival goals or a lifestyle strategy that contributes to the construction of identity? Harvesters rated their importance as follows:

How important is balsam bough picking for your livelihood? For your lifestyle?

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<th>Livelihood</th>
<th>Lifestyle</th>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Very Important</td>
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Lifestyle strategies:
“It’s fun being out in the woods.” (#8)
“It’s about getting outdoors, being with the family.” (#3)
“It is something that has been bred into me since I was a kid.” (#39)

Livelihood strategies:
“I’ve done it for a long time, it’s good money.” (#39)
“The balsam business is an excellent business. It’s hard work but you sleep well and the food tastes better when you are done.” (#13)

Harvester identity

While discussing harvesting, these pickers expressed the relative importance of working vs. harvesting by identifying themselves as:

- “Worker who harvests” 37.5%
- “Harvester who works” 35.0%
- “Retired” 17.5%
- “Other” 10.0%

Of special note, is that loggers or independent logging operators only identified themselves as “harvesters who work” - 43% of the category.

All harvesters sell the balsam boughs they harvest and use the income* for:

- 61% general expenses or specific bills (e.g., medical bills, insurance)
- 32% Christmas expenses
- 15% “extra money” (e.g., snowmobiles, vacations, hunting, guns, etc.)

*Harvesters could choose more than one category.

Conclusions

- These Minnesota harvesters pick balsam bough for both lifestyle and livelihood reasons, depending on age, current employment, and family history.
- The majority of public land harvesting permits were obtained by men but in many cases the harvesting activity was done by a family or a group of close friends.
- No major county differences emerged in relation to demographic, identity, or motivational factors.
- Based on this study, it is highly likely that balsam bough harvesting will persist as a factor in multiple-use management of forest ecosystems in northeastern Minnesota.

Acknowledgments:
- The Balsam Bough Partnership
- The University of Minnesota Experiment Station
- Photos: John Krantz

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