

Forest lands offer opportunities to harvest such non-traditional crops as salal, salmonberry, alder and medicinals, says Darcy Mitchell.

Bruce Winfield photo

More than tree

Residents of traditional logging communities are looking to the forest to supply other resources

BY BRUCE WINFIELD

PORT McNEILL

A wealth of unrecognized economic opportunities is nestled beneath the trees of Vancouver Island.

There's more than wild mushrooms growing on the forest floor, says a researcher from Royal Roads University who leads a demonstration project evaluating the potential for harvesting more than timber from our forests.

"With collaboration from the First Nations community, the forest companies and local organizations and individuals, we have been looking at non-timber forest products (NTFPs) — like salal, mushrooms, ferns and mosses, cedar boughs, cedar oil and wild berries, to name just a few," says Darcy Mitchell, an adjunct professor who lives in the Malcolm Island community of Sointula and commutes to teach at Royal Roads University.

"The purpose of the project is to support the sustainable use of non-timber forest products, so rural and resource-dependent communities can achieve more diverse and stable economies," she adds. "If we are careful, there is no reason these resources cannot be harvested forever."

Research for what is officially known as the Integrated Demonstration Project for Non-Timber Forest Products — Northern Vancouver Island is being done mainly in the Port McNeill, Port Hardy, Nimpkish Valley, Alert Bay and Sointula areas, but lessons learned about the forest can be applied elsewhere.

"Any community that is trying to diversify its economy while maintaining its quality of life can learn from this project," says Mitchell. "What we are learning is all transferable ... how to harvest, when to harvest, what the prices are, where the markets are and how to reach them."

According to Mary Bernard, Royal Roads University director of research, the project is "a good example of our university's commitment to action-oriented research that meets market needs and supports environmental sustainability ... it focuses on the unifying theme of economic, social, organizational and environmental sustainability."

While the demonstration project is ongoing, Mitchell says the first two years clearly show that people can make a reasonable living without damaging the environment. "At least five new businesses employing harvesters have started since our project team and local partners began raising awareness of the opportunities and providing information and assistance," says Mitchell.

Many people are reluctant to try opportunities offered by things such as mushroom picking, because



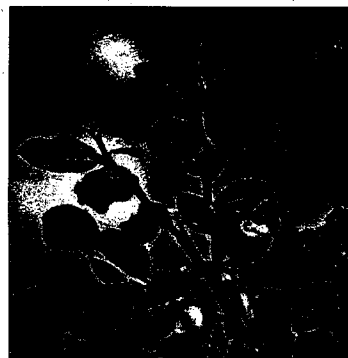
they see the work as seasonal and unpredictable, but Mitchell says that doesn't have to be. "There is always something available, so there is a significant opportunity of year-round employment for people who are willing to put in the time and effort to build a business that handles several products," she says.

The demonstration project was first envisioned in the spring of 1998, while visionaries talked at a conference on non-timber forest products held in Alert Bay. Since then, many local organizations have supported workshops and smaller research projects.

The dream of a major integrated project didn't materialize until 2001-2002, when Forest Renewal B.C. approved \$250,000 for the Royal Roads University proposal. That was augmented by a cash donation from Western Forest Products and donations in kind from forest companies, First Nations, Community Futures, the B.C. Ministry of Forests and the Canadian Forestry Service.

One of the first steps in sustainable development of non-timber forest products is to obtain information on their distribution, abundance and economic value. The first year, researchers went into the woods to count plants and mushrooms growing locally. Then, using maps from Western Forest Products and Canadian Forest Products, they correlated forest types with information on non-timber species so they can predict what types of plants grow where, what quantity can be expected and how the amount can be improved.

The first year also was spent promoting the concept to the community — with field trips, information booths and even an entry in parades — and this was so successful that a workshop at the end of that year drew more than 80 people.



"Local people came from all sectors — from the First Nations, the forest industry, the harvesters, the government, North Island College and the general public," remembers Mitchell. "After the workshop, we felt that non-timber forest products were really on the local map."

Researchers found that northern Vancouver Island non-timber forest products are sold in Europe, Asia, the United States and many parts of Canada. Salal is shipped to Amsterdam, cedar oil to the U.S., evergreen boughs to domestic and international markets and ferns to nurseries on Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland. Across B.C., the value of products being harvested is estimated at \$280 million.

Also an early priority for the project was developing a 15-credit certificate program that will see Royal Roads professors and local instructors present a series of workshops, each two- or three-days long, on northern Vancouver Island this summer and fall. Two elective courses and a project, with areas of specialization being entrepreneurship, heritage interpretation and tourism, community economic development and resource management will follow this. Tuition is expected to be \$6,000 for the one-year program.

"I'm proud of this certificate program because it really embodies the spirit of collaboration Royal Roads University looks for in its applied research and teaching," says Mitchell. "Much of the program will be delivered locally, the instruction will be delivered by locals experts and academics, and it will be meeting community needs."

The demonstration project has proven a real catalyst for people on northern Vancouver Island, says manager Cathy Denham of Community Futures

Development Corporation of Mount Waddington. "When you're looking at economic development, you should look first at what you already have, your assets, and non-timber forest products is something we have in abundance," she notes. "The number of people working in the industry on northern Vancouver Island has grown by at least 400 per cent in the past three years."

People on northern Vancouver Island want to build a north island innovation centre for non-timber forest products, says Denham, which would have a board including Community Futures, Royal Roads, First Nations and interested persons. It would provide a focal point for gathering and sharing information on non-timber forest products, as well as a central place to bring them for processing and shipping, says Denham.

Denham recalls a man from Oregon who came to one of the first workshops at the beginning of the demonstration project. "You're sitting on a pot of gold, and you don't even realize it," he said.

That has apparently been changing, says Mitchell.

"I think northern Vancouver Island will actually become known as the place for non-timber forest products," she notes. "There is nowhere else in B.C. where there is as much research to support employment and investment, and where there is as much concern for good resource stewardship and the long term well-being of the community."

To help spread the word even further, the demonstration project has opened a Web site at www.island.net/~ntfp/, where a wealth of reports, newsletters and information is available.

Bruce Winfield lives in Port Hardy.