

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

27 September 2016

FORAGING PROTEST DEFEATS OFFICIALDOM!

I know I sent out the last newsletter only a week ago, but there have been two major developments since then. The first is the arrival of the main mushroom crop and the second is my rather successful act of civil disobedience last Friday in the New Forest.



Signs warning people that picking is forbidden are on display at every car park

As readers will know, I have been getting increasingly infuriated by the growing tide of completely unwarranted restrictions that some 'conservation' bodies are trying to impose on the public. These are completely unsupported by any scientific evidence, but instead justified by anecdotal accounts of 'harm' and 'the precautionary principle' by the unelected quangos that run most of our public access land. In the case of the New Forest, the stories of 'gangs of East Europeans stripping the woods bare for profit' are also heavily tinged with racism (just try substituting 'gypsies' or 'Jews' for Poles). On top of this, I have become increasingly certain that the ban had absolutely no basis in law.



The visual irony of this 'welcome' post has clearly escaped the Forestry Commission

So, I have slowly been getting more and more annoyed to the point that I suggested to various professional foraging friends based in the area that we should mount an act of civil disobedience. "What a splendid idea!" Was the response. "But we've all got vested interests down here, we can't afford it should things go wrong, but we're right behind you." I thought about it for a bit and decided to charge headfirst towards the cannons. Mind you, I was not alone. Before I fired off an e-mail to the Forestry Commission to warn them of my plans to pick lots of mushrooms, I recruited support in the form of fellow forager and friend Peter Studzinski (www.absolutelywild.co.uk) and Ben Webster from *The Times* plus freelance photographer Chris. Having got these on board, I sent off the following e-mail:

Dear Forestry Commission ,

I am deeply concerned by your 'mushroom picking ban' in the New Forest. This has no scientific or legal basis. Also, no evidence of any genuine problem has been produced – where are the photographs, the confiscated hauls, the pictures of devastated ground? Instead your 'ban' frightens innocent locals into curbing a perfectly harmless activity. It also stimulates racist abuse targeted at anyone even looking at mushrooms and it curbs genuine attempts to encourage the generally mycophobic British public to learn more about the fascinating fungal kingdom.

As a result I intend to challenge your Rangers to stop me picking mushrooms by flagrantly breaching your 'ban'.

I will, accordingly, be arriving at Lyndhurst at 10am on Friday 23 September to pick mushrooms. We can sort out the precise location closer to the date, but obviously I know your Rangers have a lot of paperwork to fill out, so I don't want to disrupt their working days too much. Perhaps they could start to liaise with me where we might meet – I promise it won't be more than a couple of miles from the coffee machine.

If no fungi are present, I will move on to several more locations to make sure you have plenty of opportunities to catch me 'red-handed'. Seriously, this shouldn't be too difficult.

Obviously I will give details of where I am going to any Rangers present, so that we can drive in convoy to the new spots. They will then have fresh opportunities to intervene.

I heard nothing for four days, so on Thursday afternoon, I sent a follow-up:

I shall be in Millybrook Bridge Car Park at 10 am tomorrow morning, with basket etc. My mobile is 07794 294221. I will be driving a dusty black Peugeot 307. I hope to see you there.

Finally I got this:

Many thanks for your response

So the next morning I got up at 5am and drove to Hampshire. The weather was glorious and I arrived early at the appointed spot.



Ben, Chris and Peter arrived on time and just as we were deciding the rangers were going to do a 'no show' a Forestry Commission four-wheel drive swung into the car park. Two uniformed officials descended, Jonathan (a keeper) and Lynda (a ranger). They strode straight over to me (clearly they had been on my website, so knew what I looked like) and introduced themselves. They then asked who the others were? As soon as Ben explained he was working for The Times, Jonathan seemed to deflate slightly. He said they were just going to do what they would do with anyone who wanted to pick mushrooms – they handed us all a leaflet saying mushroom picking is not allowed and said they didn't want us to pick anything. Now I know from numerous reports from other mushroom pickers that this isn't their standard procedure.

The rangers tell people it's illegal and if they have anything in their baskets they insist on the contents being tipped on the ground. Anyway, to cut a long story short, instead of doing the sensible thing and leaving promptly, Jonathan spent an hour trying to justify the FC's stance. He wasn't the brightest pencil in the case and kept contradicting himself.

We repeatedly asked them if I was about to commit an offence? He started by saying no, then he said he didn't know, then he said he did know, but he didn't want to say what this was, then he said we probably weren't committing an offence, but it was up to his bosses to prosecute [sic].

I left telling him I fully intended to collect more than my personal allowance and that I had scales if he'd forgotten his. I deliberately picked about 2kg of mushrooms to make sure I was doubly-flouting the 'ban', but they weren't there when we got back. Anyway, that is my version of events – here is a slightly more detached version from *The Times* the next day (24 September):

Foragers say New Forest 'ban' takes the fun out of fungi

Ben Webster Environment Editor

It is the season of mellow fruitfulness: forest floors are beginning to fill with leaves but also millions of edible mushrooms.

For those who can distinguish the aptly named death cap from porcini and chanterelle, this is a magical time of year. Delicious free meals are on offer in woods around the country.

Yet this year foragers have been ordered not to pick a single mushroom from the 145 square miles of the New Forest. The Forestry Commission has issued a "no picking rule", claiming that a growing trend for foraging is stripping the forest of its fungi.

Mushroom lovers who have been collecting for personal consumption for decades are in uproar over what they say is an unjustified abuse of authority.

Daniel Butler, a writer who runs "fungi forays" to teach people what is and isn't edible, is convinced that there is no legal basis for the ban and that the commission is deliberately misleading people into fearing they might be prosecuted.

So yesterday, having informed the commission of his plans and inviting it to arrest him, Mr Butler went foraging west of Lyndhurst. Two commission officials



turned up and handed Mr Butler a leaflet stating "no picking". They also took his details and said they would report him to their managers. Asked if he might face any action, a commission official said: "I don't know. That's for our legal team to decide."

However, a commission spokesman later admitted to *The Times* that it was not against the law to pick for personal consumption. He denied that it had misled people into thinking mushroom picking was banned and said it was simply asking people "would you help us by not picking at all".

He said a press release announcing the campaign had not used the word "ban". The release referred to a new "no picking rule" and said the commission was "no longer permitting picking on any scale" in the site of special scientific interest which covers most of the New Forest.

Only about 100 of 13,000 mushroom species you can see with the naked eye are worth eating, while 50 are seriously poisonous. The commission's rangers have told visitors that no picking on any scale is permitted. Red signs

Daniel Butler, with a trug of freshly picked mushrooms, is challenging the Forestry Commission's ruling

have been put up in car parks depicting a mushroom with the words "no picking" slashed across it

The Theft Act 1968 states that it is not stealing to pick wild mushrooms on any land unless it is done for "reward or for sale or other commercial purpose".

Mr Butler said: "They have scared people into thinking there is ban, which stops people from engaging in an ancient pastime and learning about our mushrooms."

He said the commission had also exaggerated the threat from commercial picking. It produced a list of 140 incidents of mushroom picking recorded last autumn but in only a small proportion of cases were people found to have more than the 1.5kg personal limit permitted under a previous code.

In one report, an official recorded no picking but thought a man "looked completely dodgy". Another report based on the sighting of a vehicle stated: "No evidence to suggest fungi picking but parked in a strange place."

Peter Studzinski, from Southampton, said he had visited the forest hundreds of times to pick mushrooms for his family and had never seen any commercial pickers. "I now can't take my five-year-old daughter out to teach her about mushroom picking in case we are made to feel like criminals," he said.

I am now a Murdoch p.3!

But enough of 'Dan the Wake', after our exchanges in the car park, we found (and picked) a huge haul of oysters, plus three or four perfect 'bronze boletes' (*B. aureus*).



Far more importantly, however, thanks to Peter's expert guidance (I really would recommend him to those of you in the South East), I finally managed to tick off the biggest missing mushroom on my bucket list – *trompettes* or horn of plenty.



My first trompettes! A moment to savour in every sense . . .

Finally, just in case anyone from the Forestry Commission is reading this – and I know you are – I picked about 2 kg of assorted wild mushrooms on my own, even if watched by three others. They were not sold, but all were eaten over the weekend by a total of

20 people. The remnants were dried and turned into my amazing oriental wild mushroom pickle. But of course this breaks your 1.5kg 'rule' – do you want to prosecute me for this?



Turning to less 'ranty' subjects, the good news is the main crop seems to be arriving – about two to three weeks later than normal thanks to the abnormally dry and warm weather.

I've got a lot of spare spaces left on my next three weekends and guests are liable to go home with a lot of mushrooms.

Let's hope for a good autumn!

Daniel Butler

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P S As always, let me know if you want to be removed from the mailing list – this is a bit more complicated at my end than it should be, but I will do my best to keep everyone happy.