

# MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

16 December 2015

## YEAR'S END?

The year ends on a slightly worrying note. It appears that after a concerted campaign by several self-appointed 'concerned conservationists', the Forestry Commission is talking about introducing a licensing system for foragers. As usual, the loudest noises seem concentrated around the New Forest, where there have long been alarming stories about 'gangs of commercial pickers from Eastern Europe stripping the woodland bare and threatening the future of fungal diversity'.

Now I live in a completely different part of the country so I cannot gainsay this, but I still treat such tales with a huge pinch of salt. For a start the stories always seem to hinge on the same emotive words and concepts, beloved by *The Daily Mail*. And friends who do forage down there point out there seems to be no hard evidence of these 'gangs'. Remember, we live in an age when tube travellers reach instinctively for their mobile phones when they see someone stabbing another commuter. Surely someone would have clicked a shutter when they saw a small army of Poles quietly scouring the forest floor?



*Where are the gangs of commercial pickers?*

As I've mentioned many times, there is also absolutely no scientific evidence that picking causes any damage to wild fungi stocks. Indeed, *The Wild Mushroom Pickers' Code of Conduct* (drawn up by Natural England, advised by the British Mycological Society and others) starts off observing 'There is no evidence picking wild mushrooms causes any harm . . .' Despite this, the Forestry Commission, which manages this ancient hunting ground, has tried to warn off professional pickers by imposing a limit of 1.5kg of mushrooms per person on each visit.

Unfortunately for the Commission a local woman, Brigitte Tee-Hillman, has been openly picking and selling wild mushrooms in small quantities since the 1970s. In 1998

she was told to stop and, after repeated brushes with the Forest wardens, in November 2002 she was arrested for collecting too many winter (trumpet) chanterelles.



*This 10kg haul of Boletus edulis would be deemed unacceptably greedy*

When the case came to court she was convicted under the Theft Act, but she appealed. Thirty two court hearings followed before, in 2006, the case was eventually thrown out by a judge who angrily complained he was there to try rape cases, not persecute elderly ladies for harmless picking. Costs were awarded to Tee-Hillman and the FC had a bill of almost £1 million. With considerable ill-grace the Commission issued her with a special licence, but it still sticks sulkily to its position that commercial mushroom picking is forbidden because it may damage fungal reproduction.

Actually the general legal situation is better summed up by the Countryside Council for Wales:

*Under common law it is not an offence to pick the "Four F's"; fruit, foliage, fungi or flowers which are growing wild if they are for personal use and not for sale. This provision does not apply if the species in question is specially protected say by listing in Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act. This means that anyone can pick blackberries, take ivy and holly for Christmas, gather sloes and pick mushrooms for themselves. However, this right can only be exercised where there is a legal right of access i.e. alongside public footpath or in a public place.*

As it shares the same laws, this also applies in England, while the situation in Scotland is even more relaxed owing to greater rights to roam.

All the same, the latest moves to introduce a licensing system have caused a ripple of alarm among Britain's professional foragers – and there are more of these than you

might think. Now I know that appears to run counter to my earlier statement, but while no one makes a full-time living gathering wild fungi, quite a few (including myself) run foraging courses, while others make medicines and produce based on wild ingredients. As a result, in a surprising display of co-operation and unity, a group of us met up in Bristol earlier this month to discuss our reactions to the moves. It was a really enjoyable gathering of like-minded extremely independent individuals and we are working to draw up sensible guidelines and to embark on discussions with the Forestry Commission.



*In some countries valuable fungi such as truffles and chanterelles are licensed*

Now it is true some countries do have licensing systems. In some cases these were introduced to counter genuine problems. Among the most obvious are the permits needed to hunt truffles in parts of Italy, while the chanterelle harvest is now strictly controlled in the Rockies. In both cases, however, the rules were not introduced as a conservation measure (their officials and legislators have a far better grasp of fungal reproduction than our own land managers). Instead the controls came in because, in countries where wild fungi are properly appreciated and genuinely valued, feuds were breaking out among the hunters. In some cases these could become violent – three people were shot in Oregon in the 1980s while several truffle hounds were poisoned in Tuscany. Such issues have yet to arise in Britain where the vast majority of the population remains extremely mycophobic – to introduce laws to stop people doing something they're not doing seems both silly and unduly illiberal.

This brings me back to my starting point. I have yet to see any proof of any significant commercial harvesting in this country. Yes, some people make a living for a few months each year picking chanterelles in Scotland, but there is little noise about a 'problem' north of the border. Down south, any 'evidence' seems limited to anecdotal accounts from wardens whose jobs depend on preventing 'damage'.



*Have you seen the light?*

I would turn the calls for licensing on their head. Our nationalized forest managers ought to be statutorily required to foster public appreciation of our natural resources using all five of our senses. Look, smell and listen have long been accepted, touch has slowly been added to the list – but until now taste has generally been omitted. Yet until the public can actually put a value on the natural world, they have little incentive to force law-makers to protect open country. 'Use it or lose it,' I say.

Happy foraging!

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