

NON-WOOD FOREST PRODUCTS: “CULTURE” + “TRADITION” = EDUCATIONAL POSSIBILITIES”. DOES IT MAKE SENSE?

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Abstract

Before man learned how to use wood as fuel, weapon or building material, he had used forest goods such as fruit, herbs, mushrooms etc. In the scientific literature, we can find many reports on their importance in culture and tradition. Their significance of forest goods in folk medicine is indisputable, but many of them, according to contemporary beliefs, had magical properties. People believed they were supposed to ensure happiness, prosperity, protect against diseases or even bring misfortune to another being. Many historical uses of these goods have been forgotten. The interest of societies in their history is currently increasing and they want to feel a connection with ancestors. They want to find out where superstitions and traditions prevailing in their country or family come from. Knowledge about non-wood forest products is a great opportunity to increase the awareness of societies about their history, but also to build awareness about the forest and nature. This paper presents an overview of selected non-wood forest products, highlighting their relationship with the folk tradition, but mainly in the context of forestry promotion - they can be an excellent element of forest education, and should also be included in the recreational management of the forest.

Key words: forest utilisation, forest education, forestry in culture, traditional forest use

The importance of non-wood forest products use in historical and contemporary aspects

FAO defines non-wood forest products (NWFPs) as goods of biological origin other than wood, derived from forests, other wooded lands and trees outside forests [Dembner, Perlis (ed.) 1999]. In Poland, it is customary to still refer to these goods as “secondary” or “minor”, however, due to proper communication at the international level, this should be unified. The use of NWFPs can be considered on many levels; these include the field of forest sciences, a branch of economy, but also tradition or spontaneous activity. NWFPs utilisation as a scientific discipline and a field of forest management is carried out to a limited extent and in a limited geographical area [Staniszewski 2018]. In many European countries, we can observe less interest in non-wood products than in wood raw material [Pettenella et al. 2019]. It should be noted, however, that NWFPs use is still important in many countries, mainly in the form of uncontrolled gathering, and not as a thriving branch of sustainable forest management. It exists outside the structures and control of the forest owner, who does not benefit from sharing his goods [Staniszewski 2018]. NWFPs use is also a spontaneous activity. In many European countries - e.g. in Poland - it is allowed to collect undergrowth products for one's own needs [Ustawa... 1991]. Collecting of forest floor resources is of great importance, both historically and contemporary - after all, it was carried out before the start of using timber. Before man learned to use wood as fuel, weapon or building material, he used the edible resources of undergrowth, mainly fruits and mushrooms. The population of many European countries still benefits from NWFPs use, just as their ancestors did [Seeland, Staniszewski 2007].

Interest in the culture of our ancestors is constantly growing. It seems extremely important to use the potential of this interest to promote sustainable forestry. This gives the opportunity to present the forest to the public as not only a place of occurrence of many species of plants or animals and a place of recreation, but also as something deeper - and even mystical. Below, an overview of selected forest resources (or more precisely, their use) is presented, highlighting their relationship with culture, but also with folk tradition in the context of forestry promotion and forest education. As it has already been mentioned, they can be an excellent element of forest education and should be included in the recreational management of the forest.

Forest benefits in tradition and culture

Historically, NWFPs play a huge role in tradition and culture. In the literature, both scientific and popular, and even in fiction, we can find a lot of information on this matter. These products were used in folk medicine, where in many cases they were treated as a panacea. Many of them, according to the beliefs of the time, had magical properties. They were supposed to ensure happiness, prosperity or protect against diseases. On the other hand, they were also supposed to bring misfortune to

another person or other living creature or even cause their death. The links between NWFPs and tradition and culture can be seen, for example, by analyzing the names of many plants. It is worth noting the connection between the Latin names of plants and products obtained from them, and mythological heroes and deities [Antkowiak 1998], e.g.: *Artemisia* - from Artemis, the goddess of fertility, helping with childbirth; *asklepios* (milk) - from Asklepios, the god of medicine; *Centaureum* - from the centaur Chiron with medical skills; *Achillea* - from Achilles, the hero of the Trojan War - many similar examples could be cited. It is not certain when for the first time man - accidentally or consciously - collected and ate mushrooms in the forest. Through trial and error, he got to know edible and poisonous mushrooms, but he did so with fear, because they were considered mysterious organisms, unfriendly, dangerous and magical creatures - he often referred to the interference of unclean forces. Even in contemporary folk nomenclature we can find "devil's mushrooms", and even those growing in "devil's circles" [Grzywacz, Staniszewski 2003]. In the case of mushrooms, however, tradition sometimes has a serious negative connotation. There are different views - local and regional - regarding their usefulness. Myths that, for example, a silver spoon turns black when placed in a dish containing poisonous mushrooms have terrifying consequences [Staniszewski et al. 2017].

Non-wood forest products in beliefs and superstitions

The development of human civilization is inextricably linked to various beliefs and religions. Our ancestors had a rich imagination, which was reflected in fairy tales and legends as well as pantheons of deities, idols and demons. People, trying to explain incomprehensible phenomena, attributed magical and supernatural powers to the surrounding events, things, plants or animals. Forest areas were no exception, with many beliefs and superstitions associated with them, and forest resources, which today are classified as "non-wood", were their integral part. Selected examples of NWFPs associated with beliefs, legends and magical properties are presented below. It is worth mentioning that many of these beliefs are still cultivated not only in Poland. NWFPs were used e.g. during religious ceremonies. One of them is the custom of decorating houses with green branches before the Christian feast of *Corpus Christi*. This tradition comes from pre-Christian times and is associated with the Slavic holiday of Pentecost and is still practiced in some regions of Poland [Śliwowski 2016]. The most common plants used for this purpose are young calamus leaves (*Acorus calamus* L.) and twigs with young leaves of birch (*Betula* sp.), oak (*Quercus* sp.) or elderberry inflorescences (*Sambucus nigra* L.) [Śliwowski 2016]. Another custom is tying wreaths, which are blessed in the church during *Corpus Christi*. In order to make them, mainly thyme (*Thymus* sp.), sedum (*Sedum* sp.) and linden (*Tilia* sp.) are used, less often chamomile (*Matricaria* sp.), mint (*Mentha* sp.), cornflower (*Centaurea* sp.), oak (*Quercus* sp.), robinia (*Robinia pseudoacacia* L.), helichrysum (*Helichrysum* sp.), lady's mantle (*Alchemilla* sp.), rose (*Rosa* sp.) and horsetail (*Equisetum* sp.). Associated with this rite is the incense of apartments, animals and people. Last year's wreaths were usually used for this purpose. This was to drive away all evil and ensure prosperity on the farm [Śliwowski 2016]. According to beliefs, some plants have the power to protect against something specific or are used regardless of holidays. One of them is birch. Its branches hidden under the doormat are supposed to scare away demons causing harm in the house [Śliwowski 2017]. In addition, swallowed willow flowers (*Salix* sp.), consecrated during the Christian holiday of *Palm Sunday*, protect against diseases [Śliwowski 2017]. There were also herbs designed to produce the intended effect. One example is lovage herb (*Levisticum* L.). An elixir made from this plant was supposed to induce love. If a woman gave a man a lovage infusion and looked him in the eye - without blinking - while he was drinking, the man should fall in love with her [Śliwowski 2017]. There are also known beliefs that certain plants have the power to negatively influence human life. One of the misfortune plants is common heather (*Calluna vulgaris* (L.) Hull). A bouquet of heather brought home could even cause the death of a household member [Śliwowski 2017]. There are also known magical uses of plants that are cultivated today. Such examples include lupine (*Lupinus* sp.) or common rue (*Ruta graveolens* L.). According to beliefs, one should not fall asleep with blooming lupine, because one may never wake up again [Śliwowski 2017]. Common rue, on the other hand, was credited with a broad anti-magical effect: it had the power to reverse spells and drive away evil [Wielgosz 2008]. One example would be a way to get rid of a monster called a "basilisk". As reported by Vargas and Zych [2018], the inhabitants of Vilnius, wanting to get rid of the problem, and who could not afford the expensive solution of mirrors (it was believed that the basilisk dies seeing its reflection in the mirror), they got rid of it by throwing bundles of rue into the basilisk's habitat. In addition, in Lithuania and Poland, rue was considered a symbol of purity and virginity. In the Middle Ages, it was believed that the smell of rue sexually excites and attracts men, and wreaths of this plant were worn by young women who wanted to get married. There was a proverb according to which a woman who sowed rue risked becoming an unmarried woman [Mazerant 1990]. The ability to protect against evil powers was also attributed to St. John's wort (*Hypericum*

perforatum L.): the juice of its herb was used to exorcise demons [<http://www.czytelniamedyczna...>]. It is also impossible to forget about a plant such as wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium* L.), which, in addition to repelling evil spirits, preserving, abortive or increasing the appetite, also had a hallucinogenic effect, and infusions from it were used to "contact with the ancestors". Wormwood leaves were used to incense the homes of the dead after the corpses had been removed, and to decorate the coffins of the dead to "protect the deceased" [Paluch 1985]. In Slavic mythology, there are also many monsters, monstrosities and other beings closely related to the forest. Vargas and Zych [2018] give examples such as the "blueberry old woman", who, wearing a dress made of forest plants and herbs, roaming the forests and picking berries or mushrooms, scared or suffocated unwary children. Other example is the "forest aunt", who, being the guardian of the forest and the animals living in it, was unkind to adult people. She killed hunters, put poisonous mushrooms in baskets for mushroom pickers, kidnapped girls picking berries. However, she was kind to children: she showed them the best places to pick fruits, protected them from the attacks of wild animals, and escorted them home. The scientists point to the growing trend of society returning to pagan beliefs (so-called neo-paganism) in recent years. People from European countries are moving away from the prevailing Christian faith in their countries to look for other alternatives. According to Bukowska-Pastwa [2011], "society is fascinated by magic, divination, runes, astrology, parapsychology, psychotronics, etc. In Poland, courses teaching the basics of witchcraft have been conducted for several years."

Educational potential of non-wood forest products

The previously described examples of using various types of NWFPs are only part of a broad knowledge base. There are a number of publications about the beliefs and superstitions that our ancestors believed in, although this knowledge is certainly incomplete and in many cases ambiguous. The use of these knowledge seems to have an extraordinary educational potential. You could call it building the future by familiarizing people with the past. Through lectures, educational activities or educational boards, information on the beliefs of ancestors and the NWFPs used by them can be communicated to the public, while building people's sensitivity to the forest and the environment. Getting to know the whole range of species used by the society can make them aware of the diversity of the world, nature and the surrounding environment. Knowledge about the use of many species of plants or fungi may also persuade society to care more about the natural environment in the future. Appropriate education in this area can also encourage people to share this information with others in the form of "trivia" or "fun facts", e.g. on the occasion of social gatherings. If this knowledge is to be effective in the field of education, attention should also be paid to education in terms of recognizing individual species of forest fruits, herbs and mushrooms. A plant or mushroom they meet and correctly recognize in the forest will no longer be just "some plant" and "some mushroom" for them, but also an element of tradition, culture and heritage that is worth taking care of [Kopeć and Staniszewski 2022; Staniszewski et al. 2016a; 2016b].

Conclusions

The examples cited above lead to some generalizations. Certainly, the forest should be perceived as a source of goods and benefits, important both historically and nowadays. In this context, it is reasonable to cultivate traditional forms of forest use as an element of the culture of our ancestors. Modern scientific knowledge should, however, verify traditional knowledge, especially if the results of current research contradict tradition. Harmful substances may be emitted from plants used for religious ceremonies, e.g. incense. Regardless of the above, the use of forest goods other than wood, especially those that are available to everyone with only minor limitations, should be increasingly considered in the recreational and especially educational aspect. After all, it is the possibility of using the resources of the undergrowth that attracts people to the forest. This should be used when designing all kinds of activities aimed at educating and making the public aware of responsibility for the forest environment and its own history.

Summary

Before man learned how to use wood as fuel, weapon or building material, he had used forest goods such as fruit, herbs, mushrooms etc. In the scientific literature, we can find many reports on their importance in culture and tradition. Their significance of forest goods in folk medicine is indisputable, but many of them, according to contemporary beliefs, had magical properties. People believed they were supposed to ensure happiness, prosperity, protect against diseases or even bring misfortune to another being. Many historical uses of these goods have been forgotten. It should be mentioned that the interest of societies in their history is currently increasing and they want to feel a connection with ancestors. They want to find out where superstitions and traditions prevailing in their country or family

come from. Knowledge about non-wood forest products is a great opportunity to increase the awareness of societies about their history, but also to build awareness about the forest and nature. This paper presents an overview of selected non-wood forest products, highlighting their relationship with the folk tradition, but mainly in the context of forestry promotion - they can be an excellent element of forest education, and should also be included in the recreational management of the forest. The forest should be perceived as a source of goods and benefits, important both historically and nowadays. In this context, it is reasonable to cultivate traditional forms of forest use as an element of the culture of our ancestors. Modern scientific knowledge should, however, verify traditional knowledge, especially if the results of current research contradict tradition. Harmful substances may be emitted from plants used for religious ceremonies, e.g. incense. Regardless of the above, the use of forest goods other than wood, especially those that are available to everyone with only minor limitations, should be increasingly considered in the recreational and especially educational aspect. After all, it is the possibility of using the resources of the undergrowth that attracts people to the forest.

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Souhrn

Než se člověk naučil používat dřevo jako palivo, zbraň nebo stavební materiál, používal lesní plody, jako jsou ovoce, byliny, houby atd. V odborné literatuře můžeme najít mnoho zpráv o jejich významu

v kultuře a tradici. Význam lesních statků v lidovém léčitelství je nesporný, ale mnohé z nich měly podle dobových představ magické vlastnosti. Lidé věřili, že mají zajistit štěstí, prosperitu, chránit před nemocemi nebo dokonce přivolat neštěstí jiné bytosti. Mnohé historické využití tohoto zboží bylo zapomenuto. Je třeba zmínit, že v současné době roste zájem společností o jejich historii a chtějí cítit spojení s předky. Chtějí zjistit, odkud pocházejí pověry a tradice panující v jejich zemi nebo rodině. Znalost nedřevních lesních produktů je velkou příležitostí, jak zvýšit povědomí společností o jejich historii, ale také budovat povědomí o lese a přírodě. Tento příspěvek přináší přehled vybraných nedřevních lesních produktů, přičemž zdůrazňuje jejich vztah k lidové tradici, ale především v kontextu propagace lesnictví - mohou být výborným prvkem lesní pedagogiky a měly by být zahrnuty i do rekreačního obhospodařování lesa. Les by měl být vnímán jako zdroj statků a užitků, důležitý jak z historického hlediska, tak i v současnosti. V této souvislosti je rozumné pěstovat tradiční formy využívání lesa jako prvek kultury našich předků. Moderní vědecké poznatky by však měly tradiční znalosti ověřovat, zejména pokud jsou výsledky současného výzkumu v rozporu s tradicí. Z rostlin používaných k náboženským obřadům, např. z kadidla, se mohou uvolňovat škodlivé látky. Bez ohledu na výše uvedené by se mělo stále více uvažovat o využití jiných lesních statků než dřeva, zejména těch, které jsou s drobnými omezeními dostupné každému, a to z hlediska rekreačního a zejména vzdělávacího. Koneckonců je to právě možnost využití zdrojů porostů, která lidi do lesa láká.

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