Bloomin' shrooms 2005

Study measures impact on Tok area

A worker reads a Fairbanks Daily News-Miner article, "Wating for the Shroom Boom." The article hung on a buying station wall during the 2005 harvest.

A year after the 2004 wildfires in interior Alaska, wild, edible, morel mushrooms flourished throughout the more than 6.7 million scorched acres — ripe for commercial harvesting. Trouble was, few locals knew how to harvest the delicacies, let alone market them at a profit.

Even worse, Jay Southard worried about "local yokels mishandling the product." The mushroom buyer from Oregon has traveled around the Pacific Northwest for 20-odd years.

"Every time you go into a new community like this, ma and pa go out there and they do it wrong," he said in the Los Angeles Times. "They pull 'em, they pack 'em in bags, they put 'em in their truck when it's 80 degrees and they melt down . . . It's always the local guy (whose mushrooms) are crawling with maggots, they're covered in dirt."

With that scenario in mind and a CSREES grant in hand, the Alaska Cooperative Extension Service and the USDA Forest Service, Boreal Ecology Cooperative Research Unit set out in summer 2005 to better understand the social and economic aspects of a morel harvest. Fieldwork centered on Tok—the morel harvest hub. During June and July, researchers encountered several mushroom buyers, pickers from Alaska and out-of-state and local residents. Telephone interviews, e-mails and news media articles later filled in the picture.

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Overall, the commercial mushroom scene proved complex and fast-paced, with many activities around the clock.

Learning the hard way

Several wholesale mushroom buying companies operated around Tok: Alpine Forager's Exchange, Hanna and Perry, Inc., Sierra Madre, Foods in Season and Cascade Mushroom Company. Each outfit had set up buying and drying stations, as well as temporary buying stations in Chicken, Northway, Eagle and Chatanika (near Fairbanks).

The businesses also rented six commercial properties at rates ranging from $1,000 to $2,500 per month. While most buyers were from out-of-state, two Alaska-based enterprises took part: Capriccio Specialties (Anchorage) and The Great Alaska Mushroom Company, a business that opened in 2005.

The mushroom-picking season stretched from the first week in June through the third week in July, with buyers estimating a harvest of 175,000 pounds. According to the buyers, local pickers sold 21,000 pounds of morels (12% of the total harvest). Despite these numbers, buyers were disappointed. They'd hoped to purchase up to four times that amount.

Here's where lack of information plays a big role. In order to succeed, a mushroom buyer must be aware of current

picking conditions, prices at other buying stations and current market demands. But this information is difficult to obtain, particularly in a competitive environment in which a buyer needs to be alert as possible, yet keep his strategy secret. Novice mushroom buying firms really struggled in such areas as attracting pickers, current market prices and developing a customer base. On a positive note, several high-end restaurants in Anchorage and Fairbanks purchased morels directly from local pickers.

A worker packages dried morels for shipping. Photos courtesy Sveta Yamin.

Morels, permafrost and mosquitoes

As far as the 11 groups of pickers, each varied widely in work strategies, years of experience, number of members and level of collaboration. Some pickers, for example, camped at public campgrounds or stayed in local motels. Most used the Internet, e-mails and cell phones to obtain maps of fire perimeters, get updates from fellow pickers in other locations and purchase tickets to the next harvest area.

Vuth Ouk, for instance, rented an old machine shop with engine blocks and motorcycle and boat motors tossed to one side. The Cambodian supervised a group of his newly arrived countrymen. The pickers can't find a job better than this, he said to the Los Angeles Times.

"They don't go to high school or college, so the most they can make is $7 an hour, and after taxes, you can't make it, you can't support three kids. (Here) they can make $80, $100 a day, they can bring over their families. They can make it."

Work conditions also varied greatly from Lower 48 locations in Oregon, Washington or California. And higher costs and fewer roads to access morel sites significantly cut into production and profits. One group, for example, harvested more than 100 pounds per person after working extremely long hours and trudging 8-to-10 miles each day over what Los Angeles Times writer Nancy Rommelmann described as "blackened tree trunks collapsed on spongy tundra which sometimes gives way to melted permafrost. There is also a low-level hum, which turns out to be mosquitoes, biblical numbers of mosquitoes."

Another group of six pickers hired a float plane to scout for mushrooms around remote lakes. After locating a promising area, they negotiated with a buyer to cover the plane's cost on the condition of exclusive rights to the mushrooms. With an 800-pound weight limit, it took three round-trips to transport passengers and cargo. Two days later, the pilot hauled out 1,500 pounds of mushrooms and then returned for the same amount and the crew in two more days.

During the picking frenzy, price per pound varied from buyer to buyer, ranging from $4 to $10, with an average of $5.

A number of locals from Tok, Chicken, Northway, Eagle, Tetlin and Fairbanks could have cared less about the price. Instead, they picked and dried morels to sell in winter.

During the peak of the season, nine pickers in Tok harvested up to 100 pounds of mushrooms a day. These locals typically used four- or six-wheeled ATVs and a boat, had an intimate knowledge of the local landscape and enjoyed the outdoors. Six of these individuals were unemployed; three others worked full- or part-time jobs. One person had actually asked to be laid off from her restaurant job in order to pick mushrooms. Though pleased with the outcome, she worked much harder than she had anticipated.

Photo courtesy LA Times.

Workshops provide information to novices, who then feel more comfortable about entering the field, where they then can make other connections.

An economic boom to the community

Aside from picking and selling mushrooms, some locals profited from renting their cars and ATVs to pickers from Outside, collecting fees for river transportation, organizing food provisions and other logistics. More than 200 people stayed in the Tok area for 3-7 weeks and spent daily on food and gas, as well as motel rooms and camping sites.

The most negative feedback pertained to litter. The Tok office of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game received several complaints about trash being left in the woods—snack wrappers and plastic bottles.

In addition to full-time harvesters, every commercial mushroom harvest sees a number of short-term pickers, many from local communities. The 2005 Alaska morel harvest was no exception, as hundreds of locals tried their luck typically over two or three weekends, combining morel picking with a family camping trip or a fish outing. One or more of the members had attended morel harvesting workshops by the UAF Cooperative Extension Service in spring 2005. Nearly 340 of the known 564 workshop attendees were contacted after the season. Of those 340 attendees, 114 had picked morels with some degree of success. Many did not use formal measuring units: they said they had "filled a grocery bag," or "probably got a few pounds," or described the containers (bags, buckets, baskets, etc.) and then speculated about weight and content. Therefore it is difficult to estimate how many pounds were collected by Extension workshop attendees and other local pickers.

A worker sun dries fresh morels at a buying station.

Workers transfer freshly harvested mushrooms onto dryer shelves.

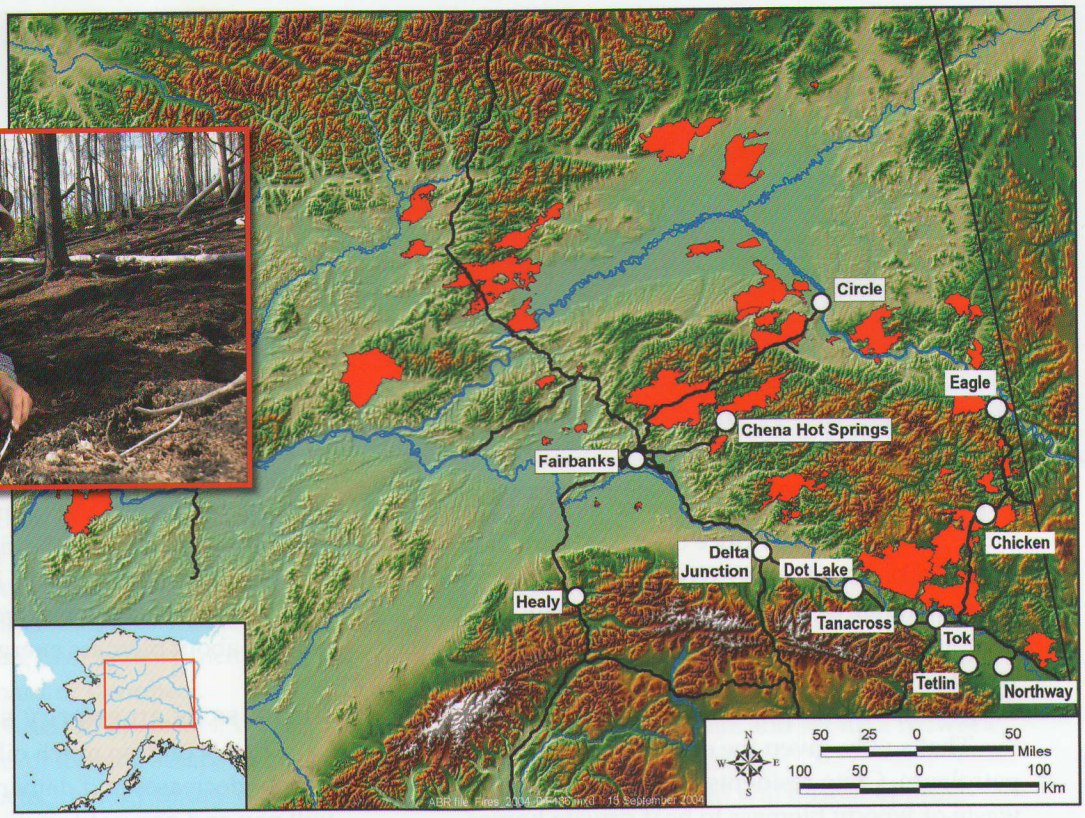
Most rookies appreciated the Extension workshops, but the old-timers frequently knew more than the workshop organizers. The best sources were buyers and other professional pickers. Overall, the workshops fulfilled their purpose, said Sveta Yamin, a UAF graduate student in cultural anthropology who experienced the harvest firsthand.

"They provide information to the novices, who then feel more comfortable about entering the field, where they then can make other connections."

But the workshops tended to over-promote the enterprise, flashing the high retail prices on morels and not emphasizing the hard work involved to harvest them in commercial quantities, Yamin added via e-mail.

"The workshops do very well to explain the logistics and they do say that it requires work and patience, but perhaps in the future more emphasis should be placed on the magnitude of the effort required for those who want to derive substantial income from this."

Most likely hundreds of Alaskans became first-time pickers. They went out with their friends or families, learned how to find and identify morel mushrooms, picked enough for a meal or two and, in some cases, sold a few pounds for fun. They may



A worker gently harvests a morel mushroom from fire-scarred forest land. The map (right) highlights badly burned areas where mushrooms flourish. Photo courtesy Ed Remsberg, CSREES. Map courtesy Matt Macander, ABR, Inc. Environmental Research and Services.

or may not do it again, but their experience has expanded the range of their land-use and culinary options.

What about next time?

Because of its remoteness, Alaska is not likely to become an annual site of large-scale commercial mushroom harvests. To operate here, out-of-state buyers have to endure additional logistical challenges and shipping costs. But fresh morels are more profitable but more difficult to handle because they tend to mold and melt, said Portland-based buyer Casey Jonquil in the Los Angeles Times.

"Morels are like nuclear materials. You get a bunch of them together without refrigeration . . . they get this exothermic thing going. I mean, you stick your hand in there and it's hot."

Backcountry access is difficult and living expenses are also higher. With plenty of morels sprouting after recent fires in the Lower 48, pickers and buyers have little incentive to travel to Alaska. Plus, planning for any potential profits for realtors, property owners and service providers associated with mushroom harvesting is irregular and difficult.

There's no doubt about it, said Jonquil, "the guy that gets the prime, killer spot can make a big difference in how the buy goes."

But most locals can benefit from this predicament. With the knowledge and resources, Alaskans can organize their own small-scale harvesting, processing and marketing of morels.

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