

## **Morel mushroom harvest in Alaska, Summer 2005**

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Funded by the University of Alaska Cooperative Extension Service

The wildfires of 2004 that burned over 6.7 million acres in interior Alaska made the region an attractive site for the commercial harvest of morels—edible, choice wild mushrooms that fruit the year following the disturbance. Although prior commercial harvests have taken place in Alaska, little information was available on how those seasons played out and what kind of impact they had on local communities. In summer, 2005, the Alaska Cooperative Extension Service and the USDA Forest Service, Boreal Ecology Cooperative Research Unit undertook a multi-disciplinary study to better understand the social and economic aspects of the 2005 morel harvest in Alaska. Fieldwork was conducted around Tok—an interior Alaska community where most of the commercial activity was taking place. During June and July, 2005, we were able to meet a number of mushroom buyers, pickers from Alaska and out-of-state, and local residents who were in some way affected by the events of the harvest. Additional data were obtained through telephone interviews and e-mail correspondence. We found the commercial mushroom scene to be very complex and fast-paced, with many concurring activities taking place almost around the clock. This overview summarizes information on a portion of the events that occurred; it is not intended to be comprehensive.

Several wholesale mushroom buying companies operated in the Tok area in 2005: Alpine Forager's Exchange, Hanna and Perry, Inc., Sierra Madre, Foods in Season, and Cascade Mushroom Company. These companies all set up buying and drying stations in Tok; some also set up temporary buying stations in the communities of Chicken, Northway, Eagle, and Chatanika (near Fairbanks). Six commercial properties were rented in Tok in connection with the morel season, at rates ranging from \$1000 to \$2500 per month. While most buyers were from out-of-state, two Alaska-based enterprises took part in the 2005 season: Capriccio Specialities (Anchorage) and The Great Alaska Mushroom Company, a business that opened in Tok for the first time in 2005.

The 2005 commercial mushroom season the Tok area lasted from the first week in June through the third week in July. The reported commercial harvest of morels in Alaska for the season totaled 175,000 pounds. This number is the sum total of the estimates provided by each individual buyer. According to data provided by the buyers, 21,000 pounds of morels (12% of the total harvest) were purchased from local (Alaskan) pickers. Overall, the 2005 crop was considered to be rather scarce, and buyers were not satisfied with the season's outcome. Buyers remarked that they were able to buy only 1/5 to 1/3 of what they had hoped to purchase during the season.

In order to succeed, a mushroom buyer must be aware of current picking conditions, prices that are offered at other buying stations, and current market demands. This information is difficult to obtain, particularly in a competitive environment. While a

buyer needs to be as aware as possible, it is also in his best interests to keep his information secret. It was clear to us that during the 2005 season, lack of experience in this environment made it difficult for novice mushroom buying firms to compete successfully: they could not attract pickers, were out of touch with current market prices, and did not develop a customer base. Nevertheless, several high-end restaurants in Anchorage and Fairbanks purchased morels directly from Alaskan pickers during the 2005 season.

We contacted eleven different groups of pickers who came to Alaska to harvest mushrooms for the 2005 season. These groups varied widely in their work strategies, years of prior experience, number of members, and level of collaboration. Some pickers camped at public campgrounds, some stayed in local motel units. (At one motel in Tok, all twenty units were occupied during June and July by mushroom pickers.) We found that mushroom pickers were very versatile in their use of internet resources, e-mail and cell phones, and were thus able to obtain maps of fire perimeters, get updates from fellow pickers in other locations, and purchase tickets to their next destinations. Pickers found that picking conditions in Alaska were different than in the lower 48; there were higher costs and significantly fewer roads by which they could access picking sites. One group of pickers was able to harvest more than 100 pounds per person of morels each day, but it required walking 8 to 10 miles and working extremely long hours.

We spoke with one group of six pickers who jointly hired a float plane to scout for mushrooms around remote lakes in the Tok area. Having located a promising area, they negotiated with a buyer to cover the cost of the plane on the condition that all the mushrooms harvested would be sold to him. With an 800 pound weight limit, it took three round-trips to transport all the people and cargo to the remote location. Two days later, the pilot hauled out 1500 pounds of mushrooms and returned for the same amount in another two days, when he also returned the pickers to Tok.

The price paid for morels varied during the season, and from buyer to buyer. Prices ranged from \$4 to \$10 per pound, with the average price being about \$5 per pound.

A number of residents of Tok, Chicken, Northway, Eagle, Tetlin and Fairbanks picked and dried morels with the intention of selling them in the winter. We interviewed nine local pickers in Tok who during the peak of the season were harvesting up to 100 pounds of mushrooms a day. These people typically used four- or six-wheeled ATVs and a boat, had an intimate knowledge of the local landscape, and enjoyed spending time outdoors. Six of these individuals did not have other employment; the other three worked at other full- or part-time jobs. One person in the first group had actually asked to be laid off from her job in a restaurant in order to pick mushrooms commercially. Evaluating this decision at the end of the season, she said that she was pleased with how she did, but that the work had been much harder than she had anticipated.

Aside from picking and selling mushrooms, some local residents were able to profit from other activities associated with the harvest, such as renting out their cars and ATVs to pickers from outside the state, collecting fees for river transportation, organizing food provisions and other logistics. An influx of 200-some people who remained in the Tok area for 3 – 7 weeks and spent daily on food and gas, as well as rented motel rooms and camping sites, was a significant contribution to the economy of the community.

The most negative feedback on the 2005 Alaska morel season pertains to the problem of litter, i.e. the accumulation of snack wrappers and plastic bottles in the woods, left by some of the mushroom pickers. The Tok office of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game received several complaints about trash being left behind in the woods.

In addition to full-time harvesters, every commercial mushroom harvest sees a number of short-term pickers, many coming from local communities. The 2005 Alaska morel harvest was no exception, as hundreds of people tried their luck. Local people typically did that over two or three week-ends, combining morel picking with a family camping trip or a fishing outing. We were able to touch base with numerous households in interior Alaska whose family or some members went out picking. One or more of the members had attended workshops on morel harvesting put on by the UAF Cooperative Extension Service in spring 2005. 340 of the known 564 workshop attendees were contacted after the season. Of those 340 attendees, 114 people had picked morels with some degree of success during the season. Many of those who provided some sort of quantitative information 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.) used by different family members and then speculated to what extent the give container was filled with morels over the course of each outing. Therefore it is difficult to estimate how many pounds were collected by CES workshop attendees and other local pickers; the maximum number of pounds reported by one individual in this cohort was 60.

Although we can not know the total number of harvest participants, it is likely that hundreds of Alaskans became first-time pickers during the summer of 2005. 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 just for the fun of it. They may or may not do it again, but their experience has expanded the range of their land-use and culinary options.

Because of its remoteness, Alaska is not likely to become an annual site of large-scale commercial mushroom harvest. To operate in Alaska, out-of-state buyers have to endure additional logistical challenges and shipping costs. Backcountry access is difficult and living expenses are higher. When there are sufficient fires in the lower 48, there is no incentive for outside pickers and buyers to travel to Alaska. For realtors, property owners, and certain types of service providers, business associated with mushroom harvesting is irregular and difficult to plan. Most Alaskans, however, can benefit from this predicament. With the necessary knowledge and resources, Alaskans interested in the commercial possibilities can organize their own small-scale harvest, processing and marketing of morels.