

From: *Voices From The Woods: Lives & Experiences of Non-Timber Forest Workers*, Jefferson Center, July 2000.

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I was born in Stockton, California. My mom's side of the family is Latino; my father's is European. I'm half Mexican and half European. So I'm multicultural or biracial, or whatever you want to call it. That's always been pretty interesting, trying to fit into society having two strong different cultures. As a child, we moved around a lot through California, but we also lived in Colorado. I went to college in Sacramento. Since then I've lived in Oregon, Massachusetts, Alaska, and mostly in California. I'm married and have three kids.

I work for a tribal agency doing wildlife surveys—mostly endangered species surveys, but also culturally significant species, for about six years. I also work with a botanicals cooperative. I do harvesting of medicinal plants to make tinctures. I harvest medicinal plants and mushrooms for personal use. I'm also a wildlife rehabilitator. I care for sick, injured, and orphaned native wild animals. Most of this work is being done out in the woods.

I always knew I wanted to live out in the woods and my husband was happy to go anywhere I wanted to be. That's how we ended up out here living a rural life. By being rural we've chosen a poorer lifestyle. The jobs in rural communities are lower paying. But for us it's very rich because we live in the woods.

The botanicals cooperative interested me because I wanted to learn more about what was out in the woods and how to harvest it and how to use it. I was interested in learning how to propagate and grow some of the native plants, to see what was on my land, to help make medicine and to make money doing that.

The cooperative has changed over the years. It started out with over fifty members. They were spread out doing everything from growing, going out and harvesting lots of different types of things, doing the medicinal market, the floral market, and working with a big broker. The group fell apart to where there were just a few people left. The few people left were able to focus—instead of trying to do everything in the woods,

we focus just on medicinal plants.

We were also able to start doing research. We got a grant, and we were able to pick certain areas and start setting up monitoring plots.

What was clear to us at the beginning of the cooperative was that nobody had a clue for most

we won't even harvest at all. The ones that are not quite so sensitive, we'll just harvest those—non-native plants like St. John's Wort.

Also because of this [forest] fire that just happened, they just sprayed all kinds of "wonderful" chemicals on some of our public land. We



Bill Otani

native plants as to limits, quantities, how much is out there. People were just taking whatever they wanted in whatever way they wanted. Since then we've learned that there are only certain quantities that should be taken out to keep populations viable. We've been able to work with our local Forest Service and educate them and start to set up quantity limits.

In this area, there's a lot of timber land owned by timber companies, and private land, but there's also quite a bit of public land. Because there's national forest, there are a lot of opportunities to be able to harvest. From time beginning, the Indian people have been out here and harvested medicinals as well as florals for basketry. In their culture there were no boundaries. In our ranger district, they're [forest service] pretty progressive—they still believe that tribal people can harvest without having permits. A lot of Native people use public land around here—it's important to us that this is respected. And there are certain plants that are sacred to the tribes that

can't harvest there anyway.

I'm out in the woods at least five days a week. I'm either looking for wildlife, or tagging wildlife, or studying habitats that wildlife needs and describing about the plants, trees. Most of us are seasonal employees. Sometimes it's really great working seasonally and sometimes it's hard. It's great to catch up on your life and be with your family and get your house in order. But the hard part is financial. So you spend part of the year doing what you can working full time. And then I go out and harvest for some of the year and live low key when I'm not working. Because I work for a tribe—when I'm working, seasonally—I have health insurance, which a lot of forest workers don't have.

What we have found with the tribes is that what they want to know is that people are going to harvest in the right way, because if you do it in the right way the plants are going to come back. The big fear for myself is that somebody is going to say, "This plant is what we need phar-

maceutically," and big pharmaceutical companies are going to take this plant.

By working with our local district ranger, a list was developed of native plants for sustainable harvest, with quantity limits, which you can get a permit for. It's a huge step. Most Forest Service folks aren't as educated and don't even know their local issues.

Local community members do harvest non-timber forest products, and it's mostly mushrooms. The tan oak [matsutake] is the number one money maker. Poor folks rely on that season. You've got your locals, your buyers—who come in usually from Oregon and Washington. You've got some pickers who come from Oregon and Washington. You've got your tribal folks. People also go to the woods for firewood on private and public land. There's not a very big floral or medicinal thing happening here.

In my neck of the woods, you've got the poorer people that will go onto Forest Service land and private people's land. People come onto my land every year and it is sad, because my kids and I harvest on our land for food. I try to work it out with my neighbors. Every year it's a deal. Lots of local poorer people, people coming in from other states, some folks from Eureka and Redding area. Southeast Asians come up here and harvest. Basically what you see is people when they go to the buyers. You see long lines of folks standing there. I'd say most of them are local Anglo folks.

Another big problem for the Forest Service that we've tried to point out over the years is that most folks you hand a map to can't read a map anyway. We can definitely translate stuff from English to other languages, but how do you educate people on how to read maps? The local Caucasian community knows when they aren't on public land, and sometimes they know they're harvesting where they're not supposed to be, but they do it anyway because they're desperate.

This was a timber area. Because so much has already been cut, this town is turning into more of a recreation place. It used to be a big

thing for people to go fishing, but the fish runs have been bad because of the lack of water. Over 90 percent of the river was taken by Central California big water, big business. We have been fighting to get water back.

I see Latino crews come up and do brushing on Forest Service and BLM land. I don't see local folks going for those contracts, but I don't know enough about the whole contracting end. I think the biggest interaction is when everybody is at the laundromat together, that's about it. There's no major conflict. I don't think most of the folks who live here locally even know they [Latinos] come and work. They stay for a few weeks and then they're gone.

We had that huge fire—that was big business for while. I know during the fire there were a lot of Latino crews doing the brushing and whatnot for the fire. That was impressive, just seeing the amount of work that those crews can do. They really outworked a lot of the locals. Outshined us!

As far as racial stuff, people in this small local town pretty much look at me as if I'm Cauca-

sian. I don't really get respect of the other parts of my culture. But it's safer that way I guess. I'm not picked upon as much as some of the Indian folks or Latino people, or other people of color. It's a daily part of life. And for my children, they're really proud of their heritage. The school pressure is totally there, but that's OK, because they have good friends who are also biracial and that helps them a lot.

One of the more immediate things I and a couple other women are really pushing for is equal pay and equal training. Because we're women, the guys tend to get more money and training.

In the longer term, with all this learning and sharing we've been doing with other cultures, I would like to see more cooperation. There is so much to learn from the forest itself as far as different techniques of managing. I'm really excited about doing more monitoring and inventories, and understanding about what's needed to have a truly healthy forest and share that with my community. There are a lot of jobs coming out for restoration and that's exciting, because

there are a lot of areas hurting out here. I can see helping other folks in my community, some of the poorer folks—a lot of these people used to be loggers and there's not the same amount of jobs out there anymore. But a lot of them have skills to run equipment or not be afraid of being in the woods. I see a lot of opportunity for a healthier community.

We know we can't solve all the problems, but sharing from our hearts all the different things we see has helped to educate me and made it so I feel empowered. It is good to know that there are people with forest worker experience who can go and talk to top level people and share from the little person out here in the wood's point of view. I think most of us want to see sustainable jobs, sustainable livelihoods, and we want to see the woods be healthier. If people took the time to listen to all the little voices—most of the people I listen to really care about the woods and care about living sustainably.

