



## Foraging, Gathering and Stewardship in Seattle's Urban Ecosystems

### **Project Overview**

The Seattle Urban Foraging Study expands knowledge of how people interact with urban nature and the implications of those interactions for social and ecological resiliency of cities. Specifically, this study will document the socio-cultural, spatial, and institutional characteristics of foraging practices in Seattle and will investigate how foraging practices fit within contemporary urban ecosystem management and stewardship activities. We use qualitative social science methods coupled with GIS to collect and analyze data on urban gathering of plants and fungi (including NTFPs such as edible mushrooms, tree bark, leaves, mosses, berries, and tree fruit), its role in urban ecosystems, and its intersection with green planning and urban sustainability movements. In addition to helping fill the existing knowledge gap about urban-based foraging, this project promotes the integration of local ecological knowledge and values of diverse ethnic groups into urban ecosystem planning and management. It supports more effective and adaptive management of urban ecosystems by strengthening connections between people and the urban forest.

### **Background:**

The City of Seattle and numerous partner organizations are working to protect and restore natural spaces, parks, and forests throughout the city. Efforts to expand natural area reserves, restore native ecosystems, and undertake stewardship activities contribute to an emerging urban sustainability framework that shapes local environmental policies and management priorities. The sustainability framework has important implications for the spatial distribution, composition, and structure of forest ecosystems.

Healthy urban forests provide ecosystem services such as improved air quality, carbon storage, reduction in storm water runoff, preservation or creation of habitat corridors for birds, insects, and other wildlife. Urban ecosystems also contribute to a number of socio-economic values including positive effects on neighborhood aesthetics, property values, and mental and physical health. In addition to ecological, aesthetic, and psychological benefits, urban ecosystems provide essential vegetation material for supporting livelihoods and socio-cultural expression (e.g. providing sources of food, medicine, and craft material). However, aside from anecdotal evidence, there is very little known about what plants and fungi are gathered in cities; what are the specific uses of various species by socio-economically and ethnically diverse population sectors; the distribution and abundance of the species gathered; the ecological impacts - negative or positive - of foraging, including how foragers manage and care for the species they collect; and the role foraging plays in developing social connections to nature and environmental stewardship.

In the absence of research documenting the plant and fungi gathering practices in and around urban environments, planners and policy makers will continue to overlook the interests of urban foragers and the socio-ecological values of important gathering activities. They will also miss a potential opportunity to engage a diversity of foragers in environmental restoration efforts that foster resilient and healthy forest ecosystems and support broader initiatives of environmental justice.

**Specific study goals are to:**

- Document the diversity of plants & fungi gathered, and the characteristics of gatherers
- Describe the social, economic and cultural importance of gathering
- Characterize the places where gathering occurs
- Examine gatherers interaction with urban forest planning and stewardship activities
- Develop recommendations for including gathering considerations into planning and restoration programs

**Research Approach:**

The study will generate qualitative and geospatial information pertaining to NTFP gathering practices in Seattle. The study uses a combination of interviews, focus groups, geo-narratives, GIS and participant observation.

**Research Outcomes:**

This study increases the understanding of how urban residents connect with nature and supports efforts by forest managers to re-integrate livelihood uses into urban green spaces. We will share our findings with participants, stakeholders, and professional peers in community forums, online web portals, and academic publications. The project has the potential to link planners, land managers and gatherers in ways that could build new bridges for urban green space management that not only supports a diversity of environmental stewardship activities, but also supports broader initiatives of environmental justice.

**Participating in the Project:**

- Share personal stories of collecting and using plants & fungi in the Seattle area.
- Participate in a planning meeting, focus group, or individual interview.
- Provide suggestions for others who may be able to help inform the study.
- Contribute to efforts collecting social and spatial information of gathering in Seattle.

**Collaboration:**

This study is part of the Green Cities Research Alliance for Urban Natural Resources Stewardship research in the Puget Sound. This Seattle study also contributes to a comparative effort to examine NTFP gathering in urban ecosystems in the United States along with two other case studies in Philadelphia and New York City, in partnership with Dr. Patrick Hurley (Ursinus College) and Dr. Marla Emery (Northern Research Station). *Seattle Leads:* Dr. Melissa Poe (Institute for Culture and Ecology), Dr. Rebecca McLain (Institute for Culture and Ecology), and Dr. Susan Charnley (PNW Research Station). Funding comes from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the USDA-Forest Service Northern Research Station in Burlington, Vermont and the USDA-Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station in Portland, Oregon.

**For information or to participate, contact:**

Melissa Poe, Seattle Lead Investigator, Institute for Culture and Ecology, [www.ifcae.org](http://www.ifcae.org)  
Phone: 206-473-7880; Email: [mpoe@ifcae.org](mailto:mpoe@ifcae.org)