

# Science for Environment Policy

## Wild food is an important ecosystem service, study argues

**Wild plants and animals consumed as food** provide an important ecosystem service that deserves more policy attention, claims a recent study. To support their argument, the researchers gathered data which show the significance of wild food to European traditions, cultural identity and recreation.

**Many countries around the world are creating maps** of their [ecosystem services](#) to support environmental policy. However, wild food – which includes everything from foraged blueberries to hunted deer – rarely appears on these maps. This is despite the fact that most ecosystem service classification systems, such as the [Millennium Ecosystem Assessment](#) and [TEEB](#) assessments, consider wild food as a subcategory of 'provisioning' services, which supply some form of material or energy output. This study's authors, funded by the EU's [BiodivERsA programme](#)<sup>1</sup>, suspect that it is being omitted either as a result of lack of data or the belief that it is unimportant.

To investigate wild food's importance, they gathered data on the availability, use and benefits of wild game, mushrooms and other plants (such as fruit and herbs) in the EU. The data came from a range of sources, including previous studies, hunting and consumption statistics, and biodiversity databases. The researchers even studied cookbooks to understand the role of specific food items in traditional cuisines.

They focused on wild food at the EU scale because many policies that affect ecosystem services are developed at this level, such as the [Common Agricultural Policy](#) and the [Biodiversity Strategy to 2020](#). They excluded fish from their study, as well as plants gathered for other purposes, such as medicinal use.

They identified a total of 38 animals, 152 mushrooms and 592 plants that are gathered from the wild in the EU. Over 100 million people (20% of the EU population) consume wild food, they estimate, and 65 million (14%) collect some form of wild food themselves at least occasionally. Around 13 million of these hunt (2.7%). There is lower consumption of wild food in countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Hungary, for instance, where early agriculture ended such traditions long ago.

Generally, wild food only accounts for a very small fraction of total food consumed, but this is not always the case. For example, an estimated 55-60% of Finnish people collect wild berries, which account for up to 34% of fruit consumed in Finland. Over 6.5% of meat eaten in France is wild game.

While there are nutritional and economic benefits of wild food, its cultural assets may be most significant – and more difficult to substitute. For this reason, the researchers suggest that wild food may be better classified as a cultural, rather than provisioning, service.

For many people, gathering wild food is a fun opportunity to get in touch with nature and spend time with family. Many people also consider collecting and eating wild foods to be an important way of expressing their cultural heritage, and these foods may be central to national cuisines. Although wild food is generally on the decline in Europe, there has been a recent surge in interest among those living in cities, in response to increasing industrialisation and globalisation.

Wild food is not without controversy, and it is important to balance demand with conservation. However, policymakers could potentially manage landscapes to increase wild food abundance and the value of the landscapes themselves.

The data on wild food collection and use are patchy, particularly because much of it is informal. The researchers therefore stress that this is the best available data, while highlighting gaps for various countries and foods.



20 November 2014  
Issue 394

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**Source:** Schulp, C.J.E., Thuiller, W. & Verburg, P.H. (2014). Wild food in Europe: A synthesis of knowledge and data of terrestrial wild food as an ecosystem service.

*Ecological Economics*. 105: 292–305. DOI: 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2014.06.018.

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**To cite this article/service:** "[Science for Environment Policy](#)":

European Commission DG Environment News Alert Service, edited by SCU, The University of the West of England, Bristol.

1. BiodivERsA is supported by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme. See: [www.biodiversa.org](http://www.biodiversa.org). This study also received financial contributions and Practice), also supported from VOLANTE (Visions of Land Use Transitions in Europe) and OPERAS (Ecosystem Science for Policy by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme. See: [www.volante-project.eu](http://www.volante-project.eu) and <http://operas-project.eu>