

Certifying the Harvest: Developments in NTFP Certification

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I coordinate a Certification and Marketing program for Falls Brook Centre, an environmental organization based in New Brunswick. I first got interested in certification issues during my work with an international agroforestry network whose members wanted to highlight the ecological practices inherent in their production system. In my initial research, I found that a number of different certification programs operating worldwide were interested in incorporating agroforestry and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) into their systems but that each was operating in isolation. Our program is focused on increasing the collaboration between these systems, providing information and resources to producer groups interested in applying for certification, and creating market links for certified products. The ultimate aim of the program is to make certification more accessible for small producers of agroforest and non-timber forest products.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO GET CERTIFIED?

Certification is a market-based tool. It provides a means to differentiate your product in the marketplace and may also provide access to new markets. Certification conveys a message to the consumer about your product, usually having to do with the product itself or the process by which it was grown or harvested. The message behind a certified product is that it has been independently assessed to meet standard criteria. Those criteria emphasize different aspects of the product, depending on the type of certification you are dealing with. But certification of forest products is more than just satisfying criteria. It is also about

sustainability. It is about making guarantees that your operation is not harming the environment, that it is fair to the workers, and that it is of benefit to the local community.

WHAT'S IN A LABEL?

As I mentioned, there are a large number of different certification programs, each with its own logo and criteria for measurement. What do they all mean? How is it possible to tell them apart? The first thing to look for in a certification system is independent verification. Anyone can claim that they are meeting criteria for sustainability, but third party assessment is a guarantee of this.

The next issue is whether the program is certifying an operating system or management practices. Operating system certifications assess whether there is a management plan in place, whether you are meeting the goals laid out in the plan, and whether there is a mechanism for constant improvement. Management practice certification, on the other hand, is more concerned with whether the production or harvest meets specific performance standards, thus providing a more objective measurement of sustainable practices. It is these latter systems that we are primarily concerned with.

The certification systems that are relevant to NTFPs include sustainable forestry, organic agriculture, and to a lesser extent, fairtrade. When we start to talk about agroforestry systems, many more certification programs also come into play, some of which are shade-grown, bird-friendly, and integrated pest management. These are less relevant for NTFPs.

CERTIFICATION SYSTEMS FOR NTFPS

In each of the three NTFP certification programs that I mentioned, there is an international coordinating body. The first of these, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), promotes

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well-managed forests through the application of criteria that address ecological, social, and economic issues. The FSC is a relatively recent certification program that resulted from concern over the fate of the world's forests, particularly in the tropics. It incorporates good coverage of many of the key issues and currently allows for the certification of NTFPs on a trial basis.

The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) is the equivalent world body for organic agriculture. It grew out of a global farmers' movement and has become synonymous with the avoidance of chemicals in agriculture. IFOAM has criteria for wild-harvested products as well as specific criteria for some NTFPs like maple syrup and honey.

Fairtrade Labelling Organizations (FLO) International emphasizes the social components of production, ensuring the well-being of the producer. FLO developed out of the alternative trade movement, and it currently certifies a limited number of agroforestry products although its product range is increasing.

I am emphasizing these three international bodies because they have each set generic standards in their own field of expertise, they play a coordinating role for organizations working in their sector, and they each accredit or coordinate certification organizations who do the actual assessments of the producer.

MEETING THE CRITERIA

These certification systems share three main criteria components: ecological, socioeconomic, and institutional. Some of the issues associated with ecological criteria are environmental harvesting practices, conservation of biodiversity, use of chemicals, and waste management. Socioeconomic criteria address the well-being of the worker and the local community, Indigenous people's rights, and the overall viability of the operation. The institutional issues that are of relevance in certification are the legality of an operation, its management plan, and the monitoring of the implementation of that plan.

Most programs include all three types of criteria to a greater or lesser extent, but each places an emphasis on its own areas of priority. Even

though each system has its own criteria, there are a significant number of areas of overlap. Some examples of this include IFOAM's recent definition of social standards and its initial movement towards organic forestry standards; FLO is currently developing more rigorous environmental standards to complement its social criteria; and members of FSC are trying to get accredited certifiers to focus more strongly on the social components required under this system. It seems that the ultimate goal, and the direction in which most systems are moving, is to develop certification programs that are more holistic and well-rounded—in other words, to move towards more sustainable production.

BREAKING NEW GROUND—RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

This is where the exciting work is happening! A lot of the recent progress has been made within the FSC, where most of the NTFP activity is focused. Currently, FSC-accredited certifiers are able to certify NTFPs if the products meet the basic Principles and Criteria of the FSC. The NTFP Working Group is looking to provide further guidance to certifiers in these NTFP assessments to ensure that the process for certification is standardized. Members of the Working Group have been undertaking field trials to test and revise generic standards for NTFPs. In the last year, assessments have taken place for chicle, Brazil nut, palm heart, and chestnut. One of these assessments, for chicle gum in Mexico, resulted in the first NTFP certification under FSC.

The other major area of work has been the collaboration between certification and accreditation systems. Organizations are looking at how they can work together better. This can happen at a variety of levels including the harmonization of standards, joint field assessments, and common promotion and marketing. The most promising work has taken place in the field assessments where certifiers from organic agriculture, forestry, and fairtrade have come together to identify where they overlap and can support each other. The joint inspections could lead to common inspector training workshops, joint questionnaires and reports, and even combining of assessment teams. These all result in reduced costs and time commitments for both producers and certifiers.

CHALLENGES FACING NTFP CERTIFICATION

Certification is not the answer for all situations; in fact, it has quite a limited applicability. This is especially the case for NTFPs where certification is relatively recent and has not undergone much testing in the field. Certification must be seen as only one tool among many to move towards more sustainable production systems. It is good to remember that the major costs of getting certified are usually not the costs of the certification process itself, but rather the costs of altering an operation to meet certification criteria.

Based on the information gathered during the recent FSC field trials, some of the key challenges to NTFP certification include the following:

- A lack of ecological knowledge about individual species including baseline data, sustainable harvesting levels, and resiliency of the species.
- Impact on small producers and subsistence users including definition of tenure and access rights, high fixed costs, and the impact of increased demand on subsistence use.
- Market demands including the quality of the product, limited market size, and uncompetitive prices versus alternatives.
- Inexperience in certification including lack of certifiers with NTFP experience, lack of standard policies, and difficulties integrating timber and non-timber products.

WHICH SYSTEM IS RIGHT FOR NTFPS?

While all certification programs are set up to deal with a wide variety of situations, each is geared to work better under specific circumstances. The key thing to remember when considering certification is that not pursuing certification may sometimes be the best option. Some further information will provide guidance on this issue.

Forestry certification under FSC has the most well-rounded criteria and is the most natural choice for NTFPs since we are talking about well-managed forests, but at the same time it is the most expensive and time consuming. In addition, it is difficult to apply this system to

many NTFPs since they do not fit the traditional forest harvest structure that FSC was set up to deal with. FSC is probably most appropriate for large industrial NTFP operations. Organic agriculture certification provides a good alternative and may be the best option for food and medicinal products. It is not as comprehensive as FSC but is also less costly and has good consumer recognition. This currently means a better guarantee of price premiums for certified products and access to more local markets. Finally, fairtrade should also be considered although it is more of an option for southern producers. Advantages include its concern primarily that producers receive a fair deal and that the costs of certification are borne by the retailer and consumer rather than by the producer. However, the product scope for fairtrade does not yet cover many NTFPs, and it has limited application in northern countries.

REALITY CHECK—WHEN IS CERTIFICATION USEFUL?

The recent field trials and collaborative activities have identified a number of factors in determining when certification is applicable. Among the most common characteristics are when it is seen as an addition to timber certification or where there is a large-scale, organized operation in existence. Examples of this include maple syrup, Brazil nuts, rattan, and rubber. Certification is also useful where there is an international market or large national market. It is not often required to satisfy the needs of a local market. Organic certification is probably the best bet for small-scale operations, but it is still necessary to prove tenure rights, which is often difficult on crown land. From a market perspective, certification must be seen as part of an overall sales package.

While getting certified may have limited application in most cases, the real added value lies in the producer's ability to apply the principles of sustainable management inherent in certification criteria. These principles are valuable to all operations, whether or not the producer is seeking certification. In this way, certification can be used by all producers as a tool for better management. Criteria have been developed by experts in their fields and represent some of the best knowledge we have about sustainable production. Even the recent field tests of draft criteria have increased the knowledge available



on best management practices for a number of NTFPs. I would suggest that more test cases are needed to refine this knowledge for NTFPs and to make it more accessible.

BRINGING IT HOME—NTFP CERTIFICATION IN CANADA

Although a lot of work has been done on certification worldwide over the last few years, it is still a very new concept in Canada. Forest certification is only just beginning to be taken seriously in Canada. Market pressure from Europe is slowly forcing timber companies to change their management practices to meet certification requirements. Organic certification has been around much longer and is increasing its market share in Canada but is not yet in the mainstream for agriculture producers or those working with NTFPs. Certification is not yet an issue for NTFP producers and harvesters in Canada.

Through the FSC, three regional initiatives in Canada are each developing regional standards. These local standards will be used by certifiers when assessing operations in those regions. Only a few forests are currently certified to carry the FSC logo in Canada and no NTFPs are certified. Organic agriculture certification, on the other hand, has been operating in Canada for many years but is still only

loosely regulated, with 47 different certification organizations in operation across the country. A national standard in organic agriculture recently came into effect that will help to standardize criteria between certifiers, although its application is still voluntary at this stage. In addition to concerns about variances between the certification programs themselves, producers also have to take into account national and provincial regulations. Each province has its own regulations and tenure system that producers are required to conform with.

FALLS BROOK CENTRE—CERTIFICATION AND MARKETING PROGRAM

The program that I am coordinating has been working with certifiers to address some of the constraints that I have talked about today. We are trying to make NTFP certification more accessible to producers. We are now beginning to focus more on developing information tools and resources for producer groups as well as on raising market awareness for certified products. We will be talking to producers about the types of information that they require and will be building a database of local market links for certified products. If you are interested in learning more about certification or working towards certification for your agroforestry and non-timber forest products, please feel free to contact me at <pmallet@netidea.com>.