

The meaning of Fair Trade for wild plants

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Abstract

Where the Fair Trade initiative is applied to wild plants, two contradictory objectives may arise: that of conserving a target plant species (conservation) and that of increasing income from it for collectors (poverty alleviation). As identified through my fieldwork in India, a Fair Trade certification for wild plants has been introduced for different purposes, including (a) to teach the local community the forgotten value of natural resources (conservation), (b) to make current collection practices more sustainable in exchange for better prices (both conservation and poverty alleviation), and (c) to help the most vulnerable collectors with better prices (poverty alleviation). A review of my past study (Makita, 2018) suggests that when there is a single primary objective, such as (a) or (c), certification can more obviously contribute to the achievement of this objective. Given the uniqueness of wild plants as an income source, it is important to clarify which one of the two contradictory objectives will be prioritised, rather than pursuing both.

Keywords: certification; income source; natural resource conservation; non-timber forest products; wild plant collectors

Why Fair Trade for Wild Plants?

Mainstream Fair Trade initiatives aim to help small farmers and plantation workers in the rural South, who are involved in the cultivation of cash crops such as coffee and tea. Collectors of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are another category of poor rural dwellers, who collect products such as wild honey, as well as medicinal and aromatic plants. While some farmers engage in small-scale NTFP collection to earn extra money, other farmers depend on the collection of NTFPs as a primary source of income. According to a meta-analysis of 54 case studies conducted in diverse regions of the world, households with a high dependence on NTFPs scored lower in terms of total income, level of education and livestock ownership than those with low and medium dependences on NTFPs (Vedeld et al., 2004). NTFP collectors with less access to cultivable land tend to live in more remote areas than Fair Trade-supported agricultural producers. The remoteness of such collectors' communities conveys strong bargaining power to middlemen in the trade of NTFPs, who pay low prices to collectors. These low prices lead to overharvested resources, resulting in a decline in the quality of NTFPs, which in turn further decreases prices (Larsen & Olsen 2007; Pauls & Franz 2013).

Certification for the trade of wild plants is expected to intervene in this vicious circle. Such a certification called FairWild can be interpreted as a specialised version of Fair Trade certification. FairWild is grounded in eleven principles, three of which refer to conservation aspects and eight refer to Fair Trade aspects, such as limiting the participation of children in wild-collection activities (FairWild Foundation, 2010).¹

¹ First, the International Standard for Sustainable Wild Collection of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants was developed and then combined with another standard 'based on the Fair Trade principles and International Labor Organization standards' (FairWild Foundation, 2021).

Dilemma between Two Contradictory Objectives

Any initiative for wild plants encompasses two potentially contradictory objectives, which arise from conserving a target plant species while also increasing collectors' income from its sale. The vicious circle of low prices and overharvest for wild plants suggests that better prices paid to collectors might encourage them to reduce the quantity of wild harvest. However, contrary to that assumption, the same economic incentive might motivate collectors to increase the quantity they harvest, given that a majority of medicinal plant raw material supplied to the market is 'harvested illegally from the wild, often in a destructive and irrational manner' (Nautiyal and Nautiyal, 2004, p. 63). The latter possibility is never favoured by certifications such as FairWild. The context of wild plant collection contrasts with Fair Trade principles for cultivated crops and other products, which are not required to balance the scale of harvest with the conservation of production resources.

In brief, Fair Trade for wild plant collection is required to contribute not only to 'securing the rights of' collectors, but also to natural resource conservation.² Natural resource conservation is, undoubtedly, important for the sustainable livelihood of collectors. The question is, under a Fair Trade initiative, how can collectors really conserve a targeted plant species whilst also gaining sufficient income from it?

Trade Certification Used for Different Purposes

The existence of the two contradictory objectives means that trade certification can be introduced for a variety of purposes beyond the provision of direct benefits for collectors. Through fieldwork in the Western Ghats of India, I identified three different purposes of certification.³ First, certification had been used to protect the entire natural resource by making the value of a specific species explicit as part of the resource. The Western Ghats was one of the world's eight 'hottest' biodiversity hotspots targeted for conservation priorities (Myers et al., 2000). In this area, it was important to conserve community groves located close to Hindu temples (called *sacred groves*); however, many sacred groves had been shrinking because the communities had tended to sell trees to finance the renovation of their temples or to open roads. In order to prevent logging, a local environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO) had attempted to teach some communities the long forgotten commercial value of fruits (for ayurvedic medicine) from a tree species growing in their sacred groves, by introducing a new source of income under the FairWild certification. In this initiative, the NGO's staff members collected fruits and provided the communities with profits from the sales of these fruits. Although it would take a fair amount of time to transfer the collection activities to people in the community, some of them had already become gradually interested in the new income opportunity introduced by the NGO. As long as the trees generate some profits, the communities will keep the sacred groves. In this case, priority is visibly given to natural resource conservation.

Second, certification may play an effective role in making current collection practices more sustainable. In another part of the Western Ghats, the same NGO had introduced FairWild certification to a tribal community which had traditionally depended on the collection of fruits from a tree species on the community's forestland. The NGO wanted to maintain the private forestland in order to protect an adjoining wildlife sanctuary. Although the traditional collection method was to collect dropped *mature* fruits *after* the rainy season, the tribal collectors had tended to climb up the trees and pick out *immature* fruits *before* the rainy season in response to the recent higher demand for immature fruits. Even if the collection of immature fruits was dangerous and unfavourable from the perspective of conservation, it was commercially attractive, so that the tribal collectors could obtain a greater income in the short period before the rainy season. By applying the economic benefits of certification (a higher-than-market price, FairWild premiums and employment opportunities in the processing factory) only to the sales of *mature* fruits, the NGO tried to induce a shift from the collection of immature fruits back to the traditional method. Although it is not easy to successfully

² Fair Trade is designed to '[contribute] to sustainable development by . . . securing the rights of marginalized producers and workers, especially in the South' (Fair Trade Advocacy Office 2018, p. 11)

³ I visited two parts of the Western Ghats several times in 2016 to 2018. Part of the fieldwork was published as a research article (Makita, 2018).

implement this initiative, this case suggests the possibility of using trade certification as a tool to encourage more sustainable collection practices.

Third, trade certification may be able to pinpoint and help the most vulnerable members of a collector community. In the above-mentioned tribal community, the most vulnerable were female-headed families and elderly couples lacking sufficient labour to climb the trees for immature fruits. The collection of mature fruits was thus their only income source. These families were satisfied with the enhanced value of mature fruits under the certification. In the case of the most vulnerable collectors, trade certification exclusively plays the role of income generation, separate from the conservation purpose.

The existence of different purposes for the usage of the Fair Trade initiative implies that we need to put more emphasis on the local adaptability of trade certification when practising Fair Trade for wild plants than for agricultural crops. Collectors' responses are sensitive to contexts such as species, locality, the extent to which they are allowed to access forestland, and whether collection is a principal or subsidiary income source. Thus, it is impossible to apply a standard certification scheme to all collectors' groups as we do in the case of Fair Trade-certified producer groups.

The Uniqueness of Wild Plants as an Income Source

Collectors' attitudes toward the natural resources completely contrast with their attitudes toward agricultural crops they cultivate. In the above-mentioned tribal community in the Western Ghats, albeit perceiving the fruit-producing trees to be their most valuable assets, the collectors did not particularly care about their own trees and the productivity of the trees:

I do not have to count the number of trees because the trees will always be there in my forest. They will never disappear.

Others' goats freely enter into my private forest. They also eat mature fruits that drop from the trees. I do not mind. I do not do anything to prevent goats from eating fruits.

We ourselves cannot decide on the amount of collectable fruits. We can collect more in one season and less in another season.

Even if we climb the trees, we cannot reach the top of the trees. We pick immature fruits only from the lower boughs. It is, thus, impossible for us to pick all the fruits before they become mature.

Immature fruits are available only for a limited time. So, we never think about increasing the harvest of immature fruits.

We are not interested in increasing the harvest from our trees. We are satisfied with a quantity of fruits that enables us to make a living.

Some trees get a disease naturally. We do not do anything to cure such a disease. The disease itself is part of nature.
(Makita, 2018, p. 625)

These statements suggest that collectors regard wild plants as an uncertain income source that requires no investment. The fact that they can benefit from nature without any investments helps them accept uncertainty as a law of nature. At the same time, however, the uncertainty motivates a majority of collectors to harvest as many *immature* fruits as possible when available, and sometimes more than the appropriate quantity without noticing. The collectors under the certification did not change their harvest of immature fruits even though they increased the sale of mature fruits. Given that collectors live with the uncertainty of their livelihoods, interventions into their collection activities through the Fair Trade initiative may sustain neither collectors' income nor the natural resources. Rather, intervention into livelihoods other than wild plant collection is expected to reduce collectors' dependence on wild plants and increase their total income.

Making Fair Trade Work for Wild Plant Collectors

Due to the unique nature of wild plants, the aforementioned second example of trade certification use, that is, attempting to change current collection practices into more sustainable ones, seems to be the most difficult task to achieve under the Fair Trade initiative. In other words, Fair Trade certification does not seem

to create an obvious win-win solution between natural resource conservation and poverty reduction, at least, in the case of wild plants. By contrast, as shown by the above first and third examples of the use of trade certification, when there is a single primary objective, such as natural resource conservation or poverty alleviation, Fair Trade certification can contribute to the achievement of this objective. When introducing Fair Trade into a real setting, it is important to clarify which one of the two contradictory objectives will be prioritised, rather than pursuing both.

As long as the Fair Trade initiative regards wild plant collectors as the primary beneficiaries, it is important to note that wild plant collection does not have to continue to be the current collectors' primary source of livelihood. In many real settings, helping the collectors access other economic opportunities may be more beneficial than continuing to support wild plant collection with Fair Trade. This is another perspective from which Fair Trade for wild plants should be distinct from Fair Trade for agricultural products. Whether Fair Trade can be introduced or not, and how long it can be used, depends on each target area's ecological and economic conditions under which potential beneficiaries attempt to make the most of available natural and non-natural resources.

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