

Starting a Non-Timber Forest Products Enterprise

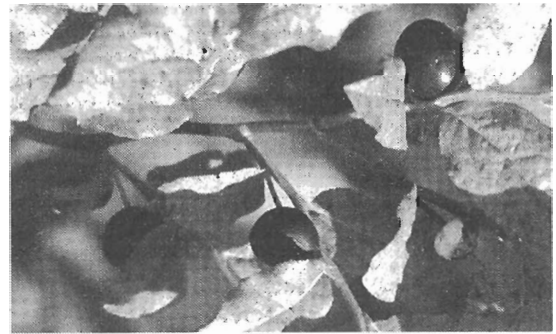
The Wilp Sa Maa'y Harvesting Co-operative

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THE WILP SA MAA'Y Harvesting Co-operative is a new community-based co-operative located in northwestern British Columbia. This enterprise is designed to support the sustainable harvesting, processing and marketing of wild berries and other forest products indigenous to the region.

The name "Wilp Sa Maa'y" means "House for Berries" in the Gitksan language and the co-op is centered in the traditional territories of the Gitksan First Peoples. Commercial berry picking is also actively conducted in the homelands of the Gitanyow and Wet'suwet'en peoples. Communities along the Bulkley and Skeena Rivers of northwestern B.C. are forestry-dependent and as such tend to suffer from cycles of unemployment. It is hoped that gainful employment through the development of more non-timber forest products will provide greater stability to the regional economy. Wild pine mushrooms (*Tricholoma magnivelare*) are already harvested commercially in this area, using a system of independent pickers and buyers (Gamiet et al. 1998).

Wild berries have long been a staple food source for both Coastal and Interior First Peoples (Turner 1995, 1997). Berries were traditionally dried fresh, or cooked and then dried into berry cakes. However, indigenous people quickly adopted European methods of storing wild berries by canning and jam making in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Huckleberries (*Vaccinium* spp.) and



The big lustrous berries of *Vaccinium membranaceum* or black huckleberry are probably the most widely picked wild fruit in the mountains of British Columbia. Photo: Phil Burton

raspberries (*Rubus* spp.) have always been a desired food source throughout the forested regions of North America, while soapberries (*Shepherdia canadensis*) and saskatoons (*Amelanchier* spp.) are more important in drier, interior climates. Today, foraging for these wild berries remains both an important family recreational activity and a significant food source for peoples of diverse origins around the northern hemisphere.

Research investigating the response of five common shrub species to different levels of light availability (as found under different intensities of forest cutting) had been conducted by Symbios Research and Restoration with the help of the Strategic Watershed Analysis Team (SWAT) in 1996 and 1997, funded by the Forest Renewal B.C. Research Program. This research documented the fact

that optimal growth and berry production of most shrub species occurred at 50 percent to 90 percent of full sunlight (Burton 1998). The species studied included soapberry and black huckleberry, which have long been staples of local berry pickers. Initial joking about what to do with all the berries left over from the research measurements, and our knowledge about where the best berry patches were, eventually led to serious plans to process and market commercial quantities of wild berries

or berry products, and the idea of a small business enterprise emerged.

We decided to base our enterprise on cooperative principles because a co-operative is a democratic way for a community group to run a business. Membership in Wilp Sa Maa'y is open to the public and anyone can become a member by purchasing one share for \$10. Profits will be re-invested in the co-operative and split among shareholders. This one share allows members to sell berries to the co-op,



Co-op member Yvonne Lattie shows author Carla Burton how to make soapberry "ice cream," whipping a tablespoon of berries with some water and sugar until it froths up.
Photo: Darlene Vegh

Gathering berries in the wild is a traditional seasonal activity for many northern families. These pickers are cleaning their huckleberries on a blanket before selling them to the Co-op.

Photo: Darlene Vegh



puts them on the mailing list for updates about our progress, allows members to vote on issues brought forth at the annual general meeting and to participate in the election of a board of directors, who make decisions about the co-op throughout the year. Only one vote per member is allowed, regardless of the number of shares held, assuring equitable community participation at all levels. All harvesters and processors must be members but membership can be purchased with berries if cash is a problem. In addition to the benefits of affordable and equitable community participation, co-operatives are a good way to start a business enterprise with limited start-up funds, because they make use of a community's diversity, existing infrastructure and commitment to place. Members are encouraged to contribute what they can: money, time, facilities, expertise and ideas. Our business plan also calls for the generation of dividends as soon as possible, in order to attract member-investors.

Wilp Sa Maa'y was incorporated under the Cooperative Association Act of B.C. on

August 4, 1998. Start-up funds for the co-op came from Symbios Research and SWAT, from membership shares and a small grant from the GitxsanWet'suwet'en Economic Development Corporation. After one year we have approximately 100 members and have sold over 220 shares. Since its inception, the organization of the co-op has, by and large, been coordinated by a hard-working corps of volunteers, primarily those serving as directors. This board consists of seven members who were elected at the our first annual general meeting held in December, 1998, five of whom were the interim directors who signed the incorporation papers in June, 1998.

One idea which has served to maintain the energy and involvement of our volunteers has been the ability to convert volunteer time into shares, commonly called "sweat equity" in the co-operative movement. Any time directors or general members spend working at Wilp Sa Maa'y activities is recorded and verified, then tallied and converted to shares annually at the rate of one share per hour. While no money actually exchanges hands (until dividends are declared, or unless a member resigns), this method of accumulating shares is an incentive for any member to build up equity in the co-op through much needed volunteer efforts. To date most of the volunteer work has been done by the board of directors but we anticipate more interest and enthusiasm as the co-operative becomes accepted as a driving community enterprise.

Berry picking is obviously a seasonal activity for the Co-op. Last year we paid berry pickers \$5/litre (\$20 for a full four-litre ice cream bucket) of cleaned huckleberries, and \$7.50 for a litre of cleaned soapberries. This figure reflects the co-op's goal to pay pickers a respectable wage, approximately \$10 an hour under average picking conditions. To determine payment, several members of the board went picking, at different locations, to see how long it took to pick berries under



Wild huckleberry jam is our flagship product, being marketed through volunteer member-distributors to retailers across British Columbia. It is currently available in 250 ml square jars and in 170 ml round jars.

Photo: Phil Burton

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various conditions. We also asked pickers for an estimate of how much time it took them to harvest the berries they brought in. Pickers took their berries to buying stations in the towns of Hazelton and Smithers. On the first day, many people brought in buckets of berries with leaves and twigs attached and our purchaser spent long hours cleaning berries. By the second day, a lesson had been learned and pickers were only paid for cleaned berries. An area for cleaning was provided by the purchaser but pickers were encouraged to bring their berries in already cleaned to minimize their time at the purchasing depot.

Our first products, soapberry preserves and a wild huckleberry jam, are now on the market. Since soapberry is a specialty item needing an acquired taste, only 108 jars (250 ml) of soapberry preserves were processed in the first year to test the market. Huckleberry jam was produced in larger quantities in our contractor's kitchen. Although starting out in a private home, we have now made the transition to renting a certified industrial kitchen, in accordance with health regulations. The jam recipe and label design were both chosen through community-wide contests. The jam is sold in square 250 ml jars featuring a Northwestern Native art motif and currently sells for a wholesale price of \$60 for a case of 12 jars. This price reflects our current costs and policies but will still have to come down to be competitive, because the specialty shops which carry this sort of product typically need to retail goods with a 100 percent mark-up.

We are targeting upscale markets which place a premium on organic foods, wilderness protection, the cachet of wild foods and First Nations connections. We think that our logo, Native roots, and the fact that berries are collected by hand in the wild are all assets in the promotion of our products, especially to urban and European consumers. Our unofficial motto is to "think big but start small." With these words in mind, we plan to

gradually expand our product line as our markets develop, keeping in mind that our products must be made in a socially and environmentally responsible manner. We plan to produce a highbush cranberry jelly in the coming year and to offer various combinations of preserves, jams, jellies and a dry bannock mix in an attractive wooden gift box.

The founding of the Wilp Sa Maa'y Harvesting Co-operative advances the economical legitimacy of forests as complex ecosystems, not just fibre farms. This year we are planning to document the location of berry patches used for commercial berry picking, and hope to have a greater say in the management of those lands. For example, it may be appropriate to encourage berry production through selective logging around berry patches being suppressed by shade, or through prescribed fire to rejuvenate older patches which have become woody and decadent. This legitimization of non-timber forest products will, in the long run, contribute to the maintenance of sustainable ecosystems and communities.

We hope that this enterprise will expand and demonstrate the importance and feasibility of land management practices and community-based businesses which do not degrade our forests. We encourage others to set up similar businesses to take advantage of other renewable forest products, and to perhaps form an umbrella association of non-timber forest product enterprises. If you are interested in participating as an investor, picker, processor, marketer or customer, or in developing a similar business elsewhere, please feel free to contact us. Your support and ideas are needed and welcome. 🐦

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