Gathering in the City: An Annotated Bibliography and Review of the Literature About Human-Plant Interactions in Urban Ecosystems

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Document Type
Article

Publication Date
2012

Abstract
The past decade has seen resurgence in interest in gathering wild plants and fungi in cities. In addition to gathering by individuals, dozens of groups have emerged in U.S., Canadian, and European cities to facilitate access to nontimber forest products (NTFPs), particularly fruits and nuts, in public and private spaces. Recent efforts within cities to encourage public orchards and food forests, and to incorporate more fruit and nut trees into street tree planting programs indicate a growing recognition among planners that gathering is an important urban activity. Yet the academic literature has little to say about urban gathering practices or the people who engage in them. This annotated bibliography and literature review is a step toward filling the gap in knowledge about the socioecological roles of NTFPs in urban ecosystems in the United States. Our objectives are to demonstrate that gathering—the collecting of food and raw materials—is a type of human-plant interaction that warrants greater attention in urban green space management, and to provide an overview of the literature on human-plant interactions—including gathering—in urban environments. Our review found that very few studies of urban gathering have been done. Consequently, we included gathering field guides, Web sites, and articles from the popular media in our search. These sources, together with the small number of scientific studies of urban gathering, indicated that people derive numerous benefits from gathering plants and fungi in U.S. cities. Gathering provides useful products, encourages physical activity, offers opportunities to connect with and learn about nature, helps strengthen social ties and cultural identities, and, in some contexts, can serve as a strategic tool for ecological restoration. These benefits parallel those identified in environmental psychology and cultural ecology studies of the effects of
gardening and being in nature. The literature on human-plant interactions also emphasizes that humans need to be treated as endogenous factors in dynamic, socially and spatially heterogeneous urban ecosystems. Spatially explicit analyses of human-plant interactions show that the distribution of wealth and power within societies affects the composition, species distribution, and structure of urban ecologies. Our review also indicates that tensions exist between NTFP gatherers and land managers, as well as between gatherers and other citizens over gathering, particularly in public spaces. This tension likely is related to perceptions about the impact these practices have on cherished species and spaces. We conclude that gathering is an important urban activity and deserves a greater role in urban management given its social and potential ecological benefits. Research on urban gathering will require sensitivity to existing power imbalances and the use of theoretical frameworks and methodologies that assume humans are integral and not always negative components of ecosystems.

**Comments**


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**Recommended Citation**


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