America’s Mixed Mesophytic Community Forest

THE SEASONAL ROUND

January

February

March

GARDENS: Plow and Plant gardens; soups, greens, peas, potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, squashes, melons, etc.

COMMERCIAL GATHERING: moss, ninebark, yellowroot, bloodroot, mayapple, helonias, ferns, etc.

COMMUNITY EVENTS: maple festivals, square dances, bluegrass, folk music, etc.

GATHERING (domestic use): dig wild greens, ramps, morels, mushrooms, etc.

Dock, Shavwee, lambs' tongue, maple syrup, etc.

Hoop, smoke, make baskets, etc.

Split wood

Winter cover and fallow

DEER

Clear grazing

November

December

January

February

March

April

May

PLANTING

THE SEASONAL ROUND

Grain kernels, wild grains, perennials, etc.

Samphire, Witchhazel, goldenrod, asters, etc.

Deer, bear, services, healthcare, teaching, consulting, mining, farming, fishing, etc.

Hunting

July

August

September

October

Ginseng

Canning, drying, dehydrating, fruit preserves, wild grape jelly, etc.

Bladderworts, skunk cabbage, groundbats, waldenberries, etc.

Indians, ceremonies, oral traditions, stories, legends, etc.

Taste and try on beaches

Planting, digging, planting, etc.

Wild rice, beans, squash, corn, groundnuts, etc.

Drumming, dancing, singing, drumming, etc.

Family reunions

Teaching, learning, reading, drumming, etc.

August

July

June

May

April

March

February

January

December

November

Clearing

DEER
The Central Appalachian mountains harbor the world’s oldest and biologically richest temperate zone hardwood forest. Spreading across the rumpled terrain of the Allegheny and Cumberland Plateaus, from northern Alabama to southeastern Ohio and southwestern Pennsylvania, the ecosystem that E. Lucy Braun called “mixed mesophytic” (medium moisture-loving) evolved over the course of a hundred million years. Whereas most forest types are dominated by two or three canopy species, the mixed mesophytic system features nearly 80 woody species in its canopy and understory, including beech, tuliptree, basswood, American chestnut, sweet buckeye, birch, black cherry, white ash, butternut, black walnut, red mulberry, paw-paw, persimmon, four kinds of magnolia, and a variety of species of oaks, maples, hickories. Never glaciated during the ice ages, the coves and hollows of central Appalachia (see backdrop photo to seasonal round) sheltered this biodiversity from the freezing temperatures that extirpated species elsewhere. E. Lucy Braun theorized that the seed stock kept alive in the coves eventually replenished the forests of Eastern North America. Ecologists today reason that the coves could again protect biodiversity in a time of global warming. A widespread nickname for this system is the “Mother Forest.”

The soils of this region were so productive that Native Americans regarded much of southern West Virginia as commons, and traditionally warring bands suspended hostilities during seasons of hunting, gardening, and gathering nuts, fruits, and medicinal herbs. Communities living in the region today continue to prize the gifts of forest diversity, not only as economic and subsistence resources, but as templates for patterning life. The formula “plant corn when the oak leaves are as big as a squirrel’s ear,” illustrates in a small way the integration of community life with the life of the forest. The environment itself stores memories, issuing the prompts to which generations of community forestry have responded.

The mixed mesophytic seasonal round is the linchpin of the community forest. Synchronizing gardening, hunting, gathering, and the marketplace, the round begins each year in mid-march with a trip to the ramp patch. Ramps, wild cousins of garlic and the first of the wild foods, are featured at spring feasts and community fundraisers. Forest bounty is always in season: hunting turkey, greens, and morel mushrooms in spring, fishing in creeks and berry picking in summer, digging ginseng, gathering walnuts, hazelnuts, chinquapins, butternuts, paw-paws, and persimmons, hunting squirrel and deer from August until December, tapping sugar trees, and preparing to drink sassafrass tea in the late winter when the need for spring tonic grows acute. Participation in this annual round integrates disjunct parts of the landscape: knowing where the old apple orchards are is vital to hunting for morels; knowing which species of bait emerge and when along particular creeks informs the practice of fishing in major tributaries; following fruits as they ripen later at higher elevations extends the berry season; following the cycle of ripening nuts is formula for success in squirrel hunting. Resting on the knowledge of elements of a system in relation to one another, the community forest fosters ideas about healthy forests that are less and less well-known: that healthy forests need multiple aged stands, including den trees, bee trees, and nut trees; or that depleting resources too rapidly is a form of “robbing the land.”

The mixed mesophytic community forest exemplifies what anthropologist Gregory Bateson called “the thinking system,” that is, the organism plus its environment. You cannot take apart the thinking system without destroying it. Violent technologies used to extract timber and fossil fuel destroy thinking systems all over the world, producing social and cultural dislocation and economic hardship. In the Central Appalachian region, mountaintop removal mining is destroying not only mountains and their communities but community forest systems that could be conserved to support local economies and societies while sustaining a carbon sink that could help to heal the planet.

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The Projected Footprint of Mountaintop Removal Mining and Valley Fill on the Mixed Mesophytic Community Forest

Resources:
Tending the Commons: Folklife and Landscape in Southern West Virginia: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/tending
EPA Mountaintop Mining and Valley Fill Final Programmatic Impact Statement: http://www.epa.gov/region3/mtntop/
Center for Folklore and Ethnography: University of Pennsylvania: http://www.sas.upenn.edu/folklore/center/Research.html

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