

# WILD INTEREST

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**R**UBBER GLOVES, EMBROIDERED BELTS AND MUSHROOM SOUP – what do they have in common? All are made from so-called ‘non-timber forest products’ (NTFPs) – latex from the rubber tree, fibre from a bromeliad and, well, mushrooms – and all are harvested, processed and sold by forest people in Mexico and Bolivia.

And that’s just the start. More examples of NTFPs – biological goods other than timber collected from forests for human use – are fruits, nuts, seeds, oils, spices, resins, gums and fibres, and include such internationally known goods as Brazil nuts, shea butter, allspice, bamboo and honey.

Just think of tropical forests as a bank for the 1.2 billion rural poor who depend on them. The timber is like a savings account, and the NTFPs are like the interest paid on it. It is obviously better to spend the interest than the savings. And NTFPs are very important to poor rural people – providing such vital supplies as food, medicines, building materials and money.

Take one community in the Bolivian Amazon. The men cut grooves in trees, allowing the latex – the sap – to run out, and then collect it in cleaned soda cans. The women then make it into waterproof ponchos and rubber sacks to hold food and valuables when crossing rivers, among a variety of other goods.

In southwestern Mexico, the pita – a relative of the pineapple – is harvested for its long spiny leaves. Women and children scrape the juice from the leaves, pull the fibre out, clean it and roll it into thread, which is then used to embroider leather belts, boots and saddles sold in Mexico and the United States. Pita fibre can fetch up to \$100 per kilogram.

Indigenous communities in the hills above Oaxaca, Mexico, collect matsutake mushrooms for cash to buy their children’s school supplies. The mushrooms are flown fresh to Japan, where they are a delicacy. Harvesters can earn up to \$30 per kilogram, but yields differ by the year: if the rains don’t come, the mushrooms don’t appear.



Photos: E. Marshall

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**B**razil nuts have long been a source of food to the indigenous people of the Amazon rainforest. The nuts are so important to these people that they have even used them as currency. But the true value of the Brazil nut is far greater, for it embodies biodiversity at work.

The Brazil nut tree, *Bertholletia excelsa*, which can live for 1,000 years, grows wild in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. Only one of the world’s millions of insect species, the orchid bee (also known as the euglossine bee), can pollinate it, which causes the development of a woody pod containing about 20 nuts.

Similarly, there is only one natural way for the nuts to leave the pod. The agouti, a large rodent, breaks the tough outer shell with its extremely sharp teeth. After eating its fill, the animal buries the rest for later, inadvertently planting new trees.

People find the nuts delicious too. They



## Hot Nuts



are also used to make cooking oils, skin-care products and livestock feed. The empty seed pods sometimes serve as bowls and cups, while other parts of the tree, rich in antioxidants, are brewed into tea to treat stomach aches or liver ailments.

The Brazil nut industry generates tens of thousands of jobs. Over a decade, it seems to be more profitable to harvest a forest for the nuts than to cut it for timber or clear it for pasture.

The Brazil nut tree typifies the Amazon’s delicate web of life. Many plants and animals – besides orchid bees, agoutis and Brazil nut harvesters – depend on it. Damselflies, for example, breed in rainwater in the empty seed pods.

And new sustainable uses for the tree keep emerging. Scientists are now experimenting to see whether it can be used to decontaminate land because it naturally sucks up radioactivity from the ground.