

Ban on picking of fungi in the New Forest

A response from the Association of Foragers

The Association of Foragers currently comprises 85 members all of whom make a living from teaching and/or practicing considerate foraging, and sign up to our Principles.
<http://www.foragers-association.org.uk>

The AoF considers a blanket ban on picking fungi in The New Forest to be ill-founded and unhelpful in the support of fungi populations. The ban appears to be based on anecdotal evidence with no science and very little expert observation to back it up. We believe it is likely, in the long term, to be counter-productive.

There are at least 2,700 species of fungi in the New Forest. Only a dozen are routinely collected as food. Of those fungi that are collected as food none are rare. If there are species under pressure, a blanket ban appears to be a very blunt tool with which to tackle the problem.

The AoF is aware of no scientific evidence whatsoever that the picking of fungi (edible or otherwise) has a detrimental effect on future populations. If the Forestry Commission has any evidence, we ask that it be made public.

All credible scientific research into the impact of harvesting finds that there is no impact:

“Mushroom picking does not impair future harvests – results of a long-term [25 year] study in Switzerland” – Simon Egli et al

concludes that:

“...long-term and systematic harvesting reduces neither the future yields of fruit bodies nor the species richness of wild forest fungi...”

“Loving the Chanterelle to Death: The Ten Year Oregon Chanterelle Project” - Norvell et al

finds:

“...(i) no statistically significant correlation between sporocarp [fruiting body (fungi)] removal and productivity...”

It's also hard to ignore the fact that a centuries of widespread edible fungi foraging in many European countries has produced no evidence whatsoever of diminishing fungi.

In presenting the ban, the FC states that:

“There is conflicting opinion as to whether picking has a detrimental impact on fungi populations, and as yet no nationally agreed scientific view to guide our approach”

Under this assertion, they invoke “the Precautionary Principle”, claiming there is no clear evidence or consensus on either side.

We therefore ask that they clearly present any credible, research-based information that conflicts with the evidence we present here.

If the FC has formulated this policy based on “*expert opinion*”, we ask that it names these experts and cites the evidence that lends credibility to their assertions.

No member of the AoF has been approached.

In the absence of presenting credible information or expert opinion, the FC goes on to make a number of vague, unsubstantiated, and frankly rather desperate assertions, almost as if they have decided on the ban then searched around for some vague justification. Please see our website for a detailed analysis of these points, which we address briefly here:

FC: “*Picking of fungi and other fungal fruit-bodies [...] affects more than just the fungi themselves and can harm some invertebrate populations*”

AoF: Please supply evidence of this assertion. Not all fungi are hosts/food for insect larvae. Those that are, are not appealing to fungi foragers. Based on long-term observational and photographic evidence, the AoF contends that the vast majority of fungi (edible or otherwise) rot in the forest every year.

FC: “*Trampling effects and erosion of wildlife habitats on the SSSI, including inappropriate parking of vehicles on grass verges*”

AoF: Unless the FC intends to ban all walking in the park, this is a general educational/enforcement issue. More people will park on grass verges to look at ponies/flowers/birds than fungi. Trampling from people who are just observing or photographing fungi would, presumably, have the same effect as that of foragers. So would the FC ultimately propose a ban on these activities too?

FC: “*Preventing or limiting spore production through the removal of fruit bodies could reduce the genetic diversity of populations and also the capacity of species to ‘migrate’ in response to climate change*”

AoF: Please supply evidence. Note our contradictory evidence cited above. Moreover, thoughtful gathering and transportation of fungi can spread spores, and can promote the migration of species.

FC: “*There is a difference between when fruit-bodies are eaten by wildlife which can help spread the spores of some species, and when they are taken and consumed by people. Removing fungi from the site can break this pathway of dispersal*”.

AoF: Please supply evidence. See our evidence to the contrary above.

FC: “*Rare and endangered fungi may be collected in error. Removal of the fruit-bodies impacts on the enjoyment of others*”

AoF: It is worth repeating: of the 2,700 species of fungi in the New Forest, only about a dozen are eaten with any regularity. Such is the state of mycophobia in the UK, rare and

endangered fungi are more likely to be kicked/trampled than gathered in error by foragers. Educated and experienced foragers would not make the mistake of gathering rare or endangered species. A blanket ban on picking will be entirely counter-productive, reducing the general public's interest and leading to further ignorance and mycophobia.

FC: *"[There is] evidence of widespread picking: Anecdotal information suggests that commercial picking is on the increase, and the aftermath of teams of pickers can often be seen"*.

AoF: Much seems to be made of this "anecdotal information". Not one of the AoF's 85 members, over, collectively, 1000's of days in the New Forest observing, gathering and teaching about fungi has ever seen one of these "teams of pickers". If the "*aftermath can often be seen*", then surely some pictures or evidence has been gathered? If so, please share. We sincerely hope that the FC is not formulating policy based on poorly researched, unsubstantiated, scaremongering articles in the tabloid press.

Aside from the complete lack of credible evidence to support the ban, the AoF believe it raises some serious practical and ethical questions:

It is our understanding that there have been a small number of inclosures with localized bans for several years, in theory, to allow scientific study and comparison against other areas in The Forest. Who has done the research, where has it been published and what has it shown?

The AoF undertakes to follow and teach the law of the land with regard to foraging (see our Statement of Principles). Please could the FC clarify the legal position with regard to this ban? Is it actually enforceable in law? If we are to teach good foraging practice, it is hard to show support if it has neither basis in law nor sensible, publicly available scientific foundations.

The AoF urges the FC to engage with the body of scientific evidence that exists, and to reject assertions, conjecture, 5th-hand anecdotal evidence and poorly researched sensationalist journalism when formulating policy. We urge them to work with the AoF in developing a more meaningful understanding of the relationship between foraging and the protection of ecological diversity. And we request that they reconsider this ban, which we believe will serve only to distance human populations from the natural world of which they are part.

Yours,

The Association of Foragers