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## “Sometimes it’s more valuable than money:” using stories and local knowledge to document impacts of wild harvesting

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## **Abstract**

Self-procurement strategies such as gardening, hunting, and wild harvesting are often overlooked in the development of local and regional food systems because the informal exchanges of these foods do not contribute to traditional financial impacts (McEntee 2011). Research conducted between 2017-2018 in the Missouri Ozarks partnered with wild harvesters and used narrative inquiry and critical reflection to explore the practice of wild harvesting, motivations for food access strategies, and the comprehensive wealth impacts of wild harvesting in the region. Comprehensive wealth, a USDA –Economic Research Service framework, provides a tool for economic development that considers multiple forms of capital and allows for evaluating a wider range of social, cultural, and other non-financial costs and benefits of local food systems investments within a local place. While the research was conducted in a rural area of Missouri, the results support a growing body of research that recognizes the need for strategies that strengthen both market and informal opportunities to participate in a local food system, whether urban or rural. This presentation will share results and comprehensive wealth indicators developed that could be used to evaluate impacts of wild harvesting activities in urban and rural communities. This project will also highlight the methodology of narrative inquiry to value local knowledge and participation in local food systems research.

## **Keywords**

foraging, comprehensive wealth, local food systems, food access, narrative inquiry

## **Disciplines**

Rural Sociology

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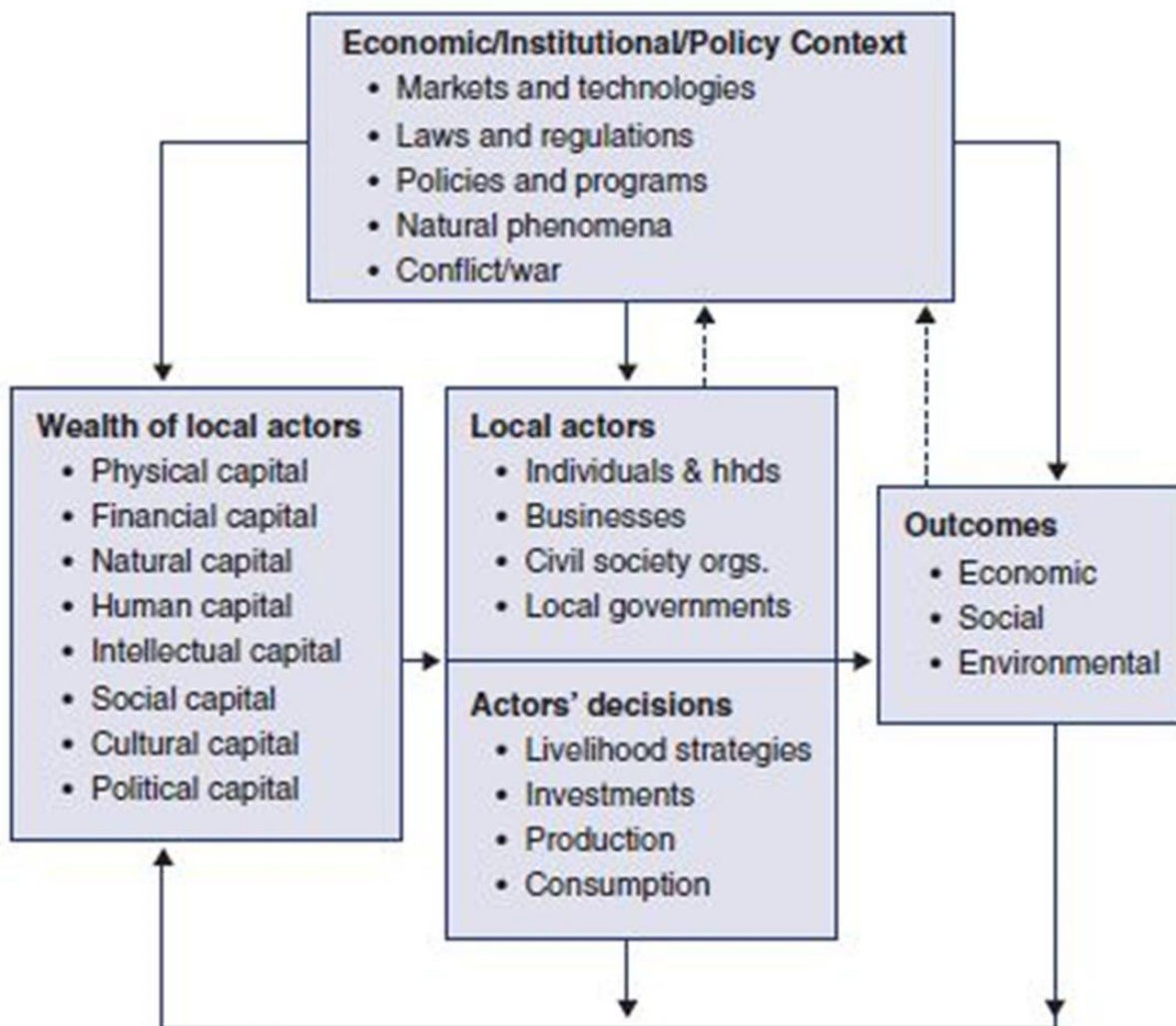
## **Abstract**

Self-procurement strategies such as gardening, hunting, and wild harvesting are often overlooked in the development of local and regional food systems because the informal exchanges of these foods do not contribute to traditional financial impacts (McEntee 2011). Research conducted between 2017-2018 in the Missouri Ozarks partnered with wild harvesters and used narrative inquiry and critical reflection to explore the practice of wild harvesting, motivations for food access strategies, and the comprehensive wealth impacts of wild harvesting in the region. Comprehensive wealth, a USDA –Economic Research Service framework, provides a tool for economic development that considers multiple forms of capital and allows for evaluating a wider range of social, cultural, and other non-financial costs and benefits of local food systems investments within a local place. While the research was conducted in a rural area of Missouri, the results support a growing body of research that recognizes the need for strategies that strengthen both market and informal opportunities to participate in a local food system, whether urban or rural. This presentation will share results and comprehensive wealth indicators developed that could be used to evaluate impacts of wild harvesting activities in urban and rural communities. This project will also highlight the methodology of narrative inquiry to value local knowledge and participation in local food systems research.

**Keywords:** foraging, comprehensive wealth, local food systems, food access, narrative inquiry

## **INTRODUCTION**

Self-procurement food strategies such as gardening, hunting, and wild harvesting are often overlooked in the development of local and regional food systems because informal exchanges of these foods do not contribute to traditional financial impacts in community economies (Hendrickson et al, 2020; McEntee, 2011). To address this gap in understanding of the role that self-procurement plays in community food access and community food system resiliency, between 2017-2019 research was conducted in the Missouri Ozarks to begin to document the impact of wild harvesting in rural community food systems. Wild harvesting is the collection of non-timber, non-cultivated forest products such as mushrooms, seeds, nuts, and plant material for food. The study used the concept of comprehensive wealth (Pender et al, 2012) that provides a context for evaluating not only the economy of a place, but also the related policy, environmental, institutional, and other factors that play a role in improving or decreasing overall wealth of a community and its residents (Figure 1). Overall wealth is measured through changes in the community capitals as defined by Flora et al (nd), including social, natural, financial, built, political, human, intellectual, and cultural.



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service.

Figure 1. Comprehensive wealth, a USDA –Economic Research Service framework. Source: Pender et al. (2012)

## METHODS

We conducted narrative inquiry interviews with fourteen wild harvesters in the rural Missouri Ozarks between 2017-2019. The region was selected for the cultural importance that wild harvesting continues to play in the region. The region is also high poverty, with significant health and food access challenges. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology that provides a process for analyzing life experience through stories and text (Clandinin, 2006). Interviews were designed to hear stories about wild harvesting experience, motivations and food priorities, and self-identified impacts of wild harvesting practices. Qualitative analysis was themed by community capitals (Flora et al nd). The process also allows for researcher and participants to review and co-analyze interpretations of the data collected (Landis and Niewolny, 2015), which for this project was

constructed as follow up critical reflection focus groups with six of the same harvesters. The resulting analysis and participant feedback created a set of community wealth indicators and potential impacts of wild harvesting in the region (see Table 1).

Table 1. Suggested impacts and indicators of investments in educational programs and services to teach wild harvesting in rural Missouri. Human capital is the skills, health, and knowledge of residents; social capital is the relationships, networks, and trust in a community; and natural capital are the natural resources in a region. Source: Massengale (2018).

Capital	Potential Impacts	Indicators
Human	Increased knowledge of wild harvesting practices by participants (+)	Change in household utilization of wild products
	Increased awareness of regional natural resources and benefits of diversity (+)	Participant understanding of the rules and regulations about sustainable wild harvesting in the region
Social	Increased networks of harvesters (+)	Harvesters develop new activities to share knowledge, equipment and harvested products (cooperatives, social groups, etc.)
Natural	Increased availability and diversity of wild/native species (+)	Landowner changes in management practices to allow for native plants and diversity
	Increased access to private land for harvesting (+)	Landowners make agreements with harvesters for allowing harvesting activities on their property
	Increased overharvest/overuse of regional natural resources (-)	

## DISCUSSION

Schmit et al (2017) used the comprehensive wealth framework at an urban farmers' market in NYC and developed indicators focused on the intellectual capital impacts that accrued to both farmers and customers at the market. We used this model to develop a set of rural wealth indicators for wild harvesting in the Ozark Highlands region. The harvesters invest significant time in providing educational programs to teach wild harvesting skills, and suggested this is an opportunity for growth, noting increased demand for these programs (see Figure 2). The proposed indicators developed through this study can help evaluate the effectiveness of wild harvesting educational programs –to identify enhancements, problems, and new opportunities for partnerships to build skills in this food access strategy. The harvesters noted additional impacts that can accrue beyond increased knowledge, including opportunities to enhance the natural resources of the region through enhanced awareness of sustainable management of wild harvest products, and to grow social networks that could lead to business agreements and partnerships for land access, equipment sharing, and cooperative marketing strategies.

While the original research question was focused on how wild harvesting might strengthen local food systems as a rural development strategy, this wild harvesting practice and the potential impacts for community food systems is not unique to rural places. Increasing interest and practice

in foraging in urban communities suggests that there is space to explore how this practice contributes to food access and comprehensive wealth in urban places as well. Pender and his co-authors (2012) suggested in their framework that it is important to consider the local context for its influence on residents' decisions, outlining the local economy, institutional rules or constraints, and local policies as key aspects of local context. Informal food access strategies like wild harvesting rely significantly on local natural resources, regulations on land access and harvest limits, and other local criteria for safe and sustainable harvesting. As local food advocates, city, state, and federal agencies, and elected officials draft policy and strategies for strengthening food system resiliency across the U.S., understanding the opportunities of self-procurement strategies in supporting food access is critical. Urban and rural wild harvesters have an opportunity to inform those strategies and decisions if we provide the chance to communicate the broader comprehensive wealth impacts that self-procurement can provide for resilient community food systems.

Narrative inquiry methodology holds potential for increased engagement and relationship building with community members in a variety of community development contexts; however, it is especially relevant for food systems research. As eaters, how we talk about food is usually complex: stories about taste, or recipes, or who we shared the meal with, or our favorite family food traditions. In sourcing food, the stories can be just as detailed: the bargains at the store, how much a garden produced, or who found the first morel mushroom of the season. To understand the comprehensive wealth impacts of particular food access practices, researchers need to hear directly from local residents. Narrative inquiry is a methodology that values individual experience, local knowledge, and collaborative work between researchers and participants. It is also an opportunity to "explor[e] the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individual's experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted" (Clandinin 2006, 46). This methodology is important to consider for more participatory research with community members as we work in our urban and rural places to find more effective strategies for enhanced food access, strong food businesses, and thriving communities. Narrative inquiry can also provide a unique method to facilitate conversations between urban and rural communities to identify shared values and experiences related to food access strategies, similarities and differences in the impact of regulations and policy, and opportunities to share skills, knowledge and food that can link and strengthen rural and urban food systems.

## **CONCLUSION**

Acknowledging and valuing alternative methods of local food access encourages design of efforts that use local assets and build broader impacts for communities and individuals. Efforts to engage with those using wild harvesting, in rural and urban communities, can expand our understanding of how informal food access strategies may contribute to community resilience in response to food system disruptions. While this research worked with rural wild harvesters, similar indicators could be developed for urban foraging initiatives. Future research could evaluate opportunities for knowledge and food exchange networks between rural and urban harvesters, and the impacts of policy to support self-procurement strategies to strengthen community food systems.





Figure 2. Informal networks of harvesters and gardeners regularly share their knowledge with each other. These networks build rural intellectual capital by sharing skills and strengthen social capital by creating new relationships for sharing food and resources for wild harvesting.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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