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# SPRINGS

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SEEING WITH A FORAGER'S EYE: A CONVERSATION WITH MARTIN  
SAXER

*Martin Saxer and Christof Mauch*

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## Martin Saxer and Christof Mauch

Martin Saxer leads the research project "[Foraging at the Edge of Capitalism](#)," based at the Rachel Carson Center (RCC). When this project began, he remodeled an old Mercedes bus to visit foragers on their journey, but he prefers the comfort of his self-made yurt. RCC Director Christof Mauch has a collection of rare alarm clocks from all over the world on his bookshelf, some medicinal plants on his balcony, and has yet to learn how to build a yurt. In this interview, Martin and Christof discuss practices of collecting and scavenging across the world.



Storage room for dried herbs. Between 60 and 70 species of wild medicinal and aromatic plants are collected for export. © 2023 Pauline Prückner. All rights reserved.

**CHRISTOF MAUCH:** You are currently supervising a team of five international scholars who are doing research on foraging in different parts of the world—in Asia, Europe, and North America, mostly in areas that many of us would consider to be remote. Before I ask you about “foraging” and what it actually means in the twenty-first century, I wonder whether you could tell us a bit about your previous research projects, which focused on “remoteness” and, in your dissertation, on Tibetan medicine in the People’s Republic of China and transnational trade in medicinal plants.

**MARTIN SAXER:** In the past project, we focused on the highlands of Asia, the vast mountain region from the Tian Shan and the Pamirs to the eastern slopes of the Himalayas. We were a group of five researchers working in what are usually seen as remote areas in China, Tajikistan, Nepal, India, and Myanmar. These areas are not as remote as one would expect, however. In fact, they typically have long histories of trade, then went through a phase of closure, and recently saw a revival, often in conjunction with the reopening of China.



The Vjosa valley in the south of Albania is one of the project's field sites. © 2023 Pauline Prückner. All rights reserved.

**CM:** Reopening?

**MS:** Yes. For centuries, until the 1950s or 1960s, there was ample border trade between China and its neighbors. However, with the Sino-Indian, Sino-Soviet, and later Sino-Vietnamese conflict, and with border-demarkation efforts such as in Nepal, borders closed. Some for years, some for decades. When the borders opened again, a substantial revival of trade took place. A decade ago in northern Nepal, for example, I found myself amidst this revival. Whatever people would drink, eat, or wear came from China. What was being sold to China were medicinal plants. There was a massive demand for medicinal herbs in Tibet.

After China's accession to the WTO [in 2001], new rules demanded the construction of new and bigger factories for Tibetan pharmaceuticals. An entire industry based on wild plants emerged, many of them not endemic in Tibet but imported from Nepal and India. People in the mountain valleys in Nepal started to collect herbs in large quantities and sell them across the border. In return, they would get rice, flour, cooking utensils, shoes, clothes, motorcycles, liquor, beer—anything of use, really. You can see this emerging frontier economy as expressions of remoteness, yes. But the people around me saw it rather as the return of the old cosmopolitan business of trans-Himalayan trade.

**CM:** So what is remote is a question of perspective?

**MS:** Yes. It is a fuzzy concept. Remoteness as such does not exist. It is produced, actively forged rather than a primordial condition. Often, remoteness has resulted from the consolidation of nation states and their borders in the twentieth century. Calling a place remote usually follows a purpose. Remoteness is a useful label, for instance, if you seek to boost development and better state institutions, or if you advertise a place for tourism, such as a "hidden valley" in the Himalayas.

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**CM:** And in these seemingly remote areas you had discovered what you call foraging?

**MS:** Actually, my interest in foraging came out of a series of different experiences, not just with herbs but also with things like scrap metal.

**CM:** Scrap metal?!

**MS:** Yes. Scrap metal. I remember crossing from Siberia into China in 2005. Before the border, there was a line of trucks waiting—many kilometers long. The trucks were all fully loaded with scrap metal: parts of machines, industrial shelves, and so on. It was stuff mostly from dismantled Soviet factories. Years later, when doing research on herbs in the Himalayas, I realized that the difference between collecting medicinal plants and scavenging for scrap metal is not a fundamental one.

Whether foragers collect scraps or herbs, they engage in a certain way with the environment surrounding them. You need the eye of a forager to notice things that others don't. You need to see potential abundance where others see nothing or scarcity at most. Foragers work independently rather than being employed; they probably don't pay taxes, nor do they have health insurance or a pension scheme. And you neither need a degree nor substantial investment to start.

In some cases, foraging is a matter of last resort, a "poor practice," if you will. In other cases, it is more akin to treasure hunting, promising substantial gains or even an avenue to prosperity. Most often, however, there is both an element of necessity and an element of choice in the decision to try to make a living from foraging.



Ironwort (*Sideritis*), commonly known as mountain tea, is one of the species collected in the mountains of southern Albania. © 2023 Pauline Prückner. All rights reserved.

**CM:** Modern-day hunters and gatherers, one could say...

**MS:** Yes. But with a tweak. Almost all foraging practices, whether collecting herbs or scraps, take place in legal grey areas. Whom does the scrap metal belong to? Is this plant protected? Does it grow in a protected area or on private land? Am I trespassing, and if so, what is the risk? This aspect of legal uncertainty together with access to a market—selling things rather than consuming

them—is what makes contemporary foraging quite different from the foraging of hunter-gatherers. Contemporary foraging is a product of the edges of capitalism. At the same time, it shapes these edges.

*Contemporary foraging is a product of the edges of capitalism. At the same time, it shapes these edges.*

**CM:** But if foraging is such a widespread economic strategy, shouldn't it make more headlines?

**MS:** The answer to this, I believe, lies in our production bias. We think of an economy as focused on producing goods—artisanal, industrial, or agricultural—and on selling them. We tend to see people as farmers or workers or service providers for a productive sector, even when they earn most of their income not from harvesting or getting a salary but from collecting, gleaned, or scavenging.

Once you approach foraging not as a relic of an era long gone but as a widespread, contemporary and global phenomenon, as a basic economic strategy and a way of relating to one's surroundings, you see a huge variety of practices. It includes not just mushroom hunting or berry picking but also practices like collecting eiderdown in Iceland, scavenging for mammoth ivory in the melting permafrost of Siberia, ripping copper wire in abandoned buildings, or even cutting up disused railway lines.



Interview with a herb-trader family in Këlcyrë, Albania. © 2023 Pauline Prückner. All rights reserved.

**CM:** Foraging is not just a rural practice then? It can also be urban? Is it something you could see here, in Munich?

**MS:** Yes. Absolutely. While writing the research proposal for my current project, I met a guy in the English Garden [in Munich]. He had a metal detector and was looking for coins and lost jewelry. He told me about his career as a software engineer. Sitting in front of screens all day long started

giving him terrible headaches, cluster headaches. With his metal detector and good ears, he made up to 2,000 euros a month from lost treasures in the English Garden and along the Isar river. The moles, he said, were his friends. They helped unearth things that had been lost years ago. His plan was to start washing gold in Spain. But that's a different story.

**CM:** This is amazing. Anna Tsing has of course written about humans who are foraging for mushrooms, Matsutake mushrooms, in contexts of economic precarity. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, she reminded us that humans are not the only protagonists and that landscapes are co-making our world. Your research has an affinity to that of Tsing, but it goes beyond it because you look at a variety of very diverse practices in many different parts of the world.

**MS:** Anna Tsing's work is very inspiring—ethnographically but also conceptually. I was reading her earlier work, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen and Friction*, while doing research in Tibet and the Himalayas. When *The Mushroom at the End of the World* came out in 2015, it helped me understand the foraging practices that I had witnessed over the years in a new way. What she describes as pericapitalist spaces and frontier economies resonates strongly with what I call the edge of capitalism—understood as both capitalism's unregulated vanguard and its margins. Looking beyond herbs, mushrooms, or berries and including things foraged not from nature but stuff left behind by human activity shifted my focus into a slightly different direction, however. "Environment" is no longer synonymous with "nature," and I see the practice of foraging now as a much more fundamental human activity.



On the way to collect common ivy (*Hedera helix*) in the forest above Peshtan, southern Albania. Ivy is used in cough medicines. © 2023 Pauline Prückner. All rights reserved.

**CM:** Let me get back to Munich and the urban or suburban mode of foraging. I find this fascinating. Looking for metal in the English Garden is very particular but there are people who search for wild herbs and berries just outside of the city. Would you consider activities like this for your research?

**MS:** Yes, of course. On our team, several of us are looking into these forms of foraging. Over the last few years, not least since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, more and more people have been looking for things that grow in nature. Their motivation may be slightly different from that of the

commercial foragers I have so far talked about. People who look for wild plants and berries to eat in and around Munich may do so primarily to get closer to nature. It is often a way of stepping outside the structures of capitalist production, labor, and consumption.

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However, some start making it a profession, for example by offering seminars and guided forest walks, sharing their knowledge and seeking to attune more people to the abundance around us. Capitalism and its edges are present here as well—not in the form of commodity chains that feed foraged goods into capitalist production but rather in the attempt to escape capitalism and transcend its confines.

The more we get to know foragers in Munich and places in other countries of the Global North, the more we learn that there is more to their stories than just middle-class urbanites seeking to reconnect with nature. The lives of the people we got to know are a lot more precarious than such an imaginary would suggest. While they may have chosen to leave the rat race of capitalism, there may not be a clear path back, should things not work out.

**CM:** I am wondering how you approach this project methodologically. You work on so many different sites. How do you communicate with one another?

**MS:** We work very closely together in our team. We have weekly meetings, mostly online and sometimes in person. We talk at length about our work, the people we meet along the way, and the next steps ahead. This is a new experience for me, an experience facilitated to a certain extent by the culture of doing online meetings. The direction our research takes, the questions and observations we follow up, come out of these weekly meetings.



In the forest above Peshtan, Albania. © 2023 Pauline Prückner. All rights reserved.



**CM:** The practices you study happen “in the open,” if you will. Foraging is happening all over the place, not on a farm, not in a factory, not in a greenhouse. How do you approach this spatially unconfined practice?

**MS:** We don’t just do interviews. We seek to understand the kind of entanglements of foragers with their surroundings, which are not always obvious from the outset. We focus on rather small samples of foragers in each of our projects, putting depth before breadth. Methodologically, we found that film, or the creation of documentary media, is an ideal approach. The people we work with are not just research subjects but rather protagonists in a collaborative attempt to see and tell a story.

Collaborative documentary media require a much deeper level of consent than interviews or surveys or participant observation. Filming is a fundamentally sensory approach. It helps us understand what people do rather than just asking what they think. It gives us access to the drudgery of foraging but also the joy of seeing and finding. Film is thus not an artsy choice; it is the backbone of our inquiry into the practical relations between foragers and their environments—before these relations become framed in already known narratives of conservation, stewardship, overharvesting, the commons, and so on.

**CM:** Foraging is an ancient activity, but it seems like what you are documenting is a revival under different globalized auspices. Is the rise of the activity that you are exploring and documenting connected to global crises? What role do today’s crises play? How is foraging different in the twenty-first century from in premodern times?

**MS:** The climate crisis but also the Great Recession and, before that, the War on Terror and the breakdown of the Soviet Union created the kind of precarity that makes people explore alternative livelihood strategies—such as foraging. At the same time, crises also tend to create niches in which strange booms take place. Hunting for mammoth ivory in the melting permafrost of Yakutia is an example of this. The warming climate unlocks the kind of ivory that you can sell legally, because, as an extinct species, the mammoth is not protected.

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A changing environment mandates a reaction and makes people ask themselves: what can we do now? In the Aral Sea, for example, there was once a thriving fishing industry. When it dried out, the salinity of the remaining basins became so high that no fish could survive. People have started collecting the larvae of *Artemia*, a kind of shrimp that thrives in very salty water, and the larvae are then sold to the Chinese cosmetics industry.

**CM:** So is foraging or scavenging becoming more widespread because of the polycrisis?

**MS:** I wouldn’t say that foraging is a phenomenon of the polycrisis per se but it is certainly amplified through crises. When more people find themselves in a precarious situation, they start improvising. When the dream of a middle-class life seems thoroughly out of reach, upward mobility is not happening, and a regular job is difficult to find, more people start foraging. But regardless of crises, foraging is crucial for livelihoods.

**CM:** How many people are relying on it?

**MS:** There are estimates that between a quarter and a third of rural household incomes in the Global South are derived from foraging practices—and this is only counting organic matter. In the

Himalayan regions where people pick *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*, the famous caterpillar fungus that is worth more than gold, the percentage goes up to 90.

**CM:** How do you select your sites? And do you feel you are missing out by focusing only on three continents?

**MS:** The ground we can cover in this project is just a modest beginning. Once you start thinking about foraging practices, you see them everywhere. I have a list of at least thirty foraging topics I would love to follow up on. The projects we selected focus on small-scale foraging and practices that lend themselves well to explore the entanglements between foragers and their surroundings.

Semi-industrialized foraging is less interesting for us at this stage. For instance, at the beginning of the project, I was looking into pine nuts in Portugal or Spain. Harvesting pine cones is now often done by enterprises on a semi-industrial scale, using rattling machines similar to the ones used for the olive harvest. I decided not to follow up on this case. As soon as machines are in play, you need investment, and the questions posed are then somehow different. So yes, we are missing out—in terms of the variety of practices but also in terms of global reach. We don't have projects in Latin American, Africa, and the Pacific, for example.

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**CM:** I am trying to understand what the foraging activity means from a legal perspective. Is it in any way related to commons in medieval or early modern history? In some parts of Europe, peasants benefitted from natural resources as a result of forest-common rights. They took firewood out of the forest or drove pigs into the forest for food.

**MS:** The topic of commons is at the heart of foraging practices. But the commons we witness are messy, gray, and partial—quite different from our images of commons in preindustrial peasant communities in Europe or the contemporary vision of commons as a good force in eco-social transformations. In such imaginaries, there is always a coherent and local community that assumes stewardship. This is not necessarily the case. Commons are often something more situational and negotiated on the spot, beyond legality or tradition. You might be able to forage a specific resource at a certain time and place even if you are an outsider. Thais travelling in groups to Sweden to commercially harvest berries during the season are an example here. Even private properties may become commons at certain times. In France, for instance, everyone is entitled to glean fields and vineyards after the harvest.



Climbing a tree to collect ivy. © 2023 Pauline Prückner. All rights reserved.

**CM:** So is there a sense at all of community among foragers?

**MS:** Sometimes, in certain ways, perhaps. But there is also competition. If a resource is scarce and difficult to find you may try to keep your knowledge secret. Truffle collectors in Italy, for example, would never let their neighbor know where they found truffles the previous year. Here, success depends on secrecy rather than cooperation. In other cases, it may make sense to pool risk and reward.

*We seek to assume the open eyes you need to forage and not to start with preconceived theories or concepts.*

**CM:** This all sounds like a fascinating project. What would you say has been the biggest surprise so far in your research?

**MS:** The whole project keeps surprising me. Foragers don't fall into neat categories. They are neither ruthless looters of environmental treasures nor naturally eco-conscious stewards of their environments. Foraging can provide meaning and income; it can be a measure of last resort or a gold rush; it can provide independence and even a sense of freedom; it can be legal but problematic or not-quite-legal but very legitimate. We seek to assume the open eyes you need to forage and not to start with preconceived theories or concepts. Like this, we let things and stories find us as much as we find them.



**Martin Saxer** is a social anthropologist and filmmaker. He obtained his PhD from the University of Oxford and has carried out postdoctoral research at the Asia Research Institute in Singapore. In 2013, he was awarded a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship by the EU, and in 2015, he received a five-year ERC Starting Grant for the project "Remoteness and Connectivity: Highland Asia in the World." He has been affiliated with the RCC since 2021. His current project is funded by an ERC Consolidator Grant (2022-2026) and explores foraging on the fuzzy fringes of capitalism.



**Christof Mauch** is director of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society as well as chair of American culture and transatlantic relations at LMU Munich. He is also an affiliated professor in the history faculty of LMU Munich and an honorary professor and honorary fellow at the Center for Ecological History at Renmin University of China.



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