

U.S. Pine Nut Forests Lost to Taxpayer-Subsidized Livestock Industry

By Kay Bushnell

My professor of Spanish in college descended from early Spanish settlers in what is now New Mexico. He grew up among the piñon trees that are native to the southwestern United States. He always smiled and spoke nostalgically of the piñon nuts (pine nuts) that he gathered as a boy in the piñon forests. “They were,” he said, “very delicious.”

Two American species of pine nuts grow wild on about 47 million acres of public land in the United States. Worldwide, there are over twenty species of pine nuts that grow in seven countries. Most of the pine nuts in our local markets today are imported from China. The relative few that we receive from Portugal and Italy are usually labeled as European pine nuts or pignolias. European pine nuts are now very difficult to find due to the price differential between them and pine nuts grown in China.

Troubles for American pine nut forests began with the arrival of non-native settlers. Before then, the soft-shelled variety of piñon nut, *P. Monophylla*, sustained the native peoples of the Great Basin (Shoshone, Paiute, and Washo). Pine nuts were an important food in their cultures for thousands of years. The first blow to the piñon forests occurred in the 1800s when piñon forests were cut down to be used as fuel for silver smelters. “The smelters consumed as much as 1.25 million bushels of charcoal a year, destroying the Indians’ pine nut groves,” says Penny Frazier, a small business entrepreneur specializing in wild crop certification and sustainability.

The question is, why are we importing so many pine nuts if we can grow our own? The answer, says Frazier, can be found in the activities of the U. S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). agencies that cleared millions of acres of old-growth piñon junipers after World War II. As the cattlemen came in,” says Frazier, “the land was manipulated to yield grasses [for livestock grazing] rather than [piñon] forest.”

Prior to 1950 many boxcars of native American pine nuts were harvested annually. “Between 1950-1972 the USFS and the BLM destroyed over 3,211,000 acres of piñon-junipers to create grazing land” at taxpayers’ expense, laments Frazier. Corporate cattlemen, she explains, pay minimal grazing fees and enjoy many free services provided by the federal government’s range managers, whose focus is to maintain range for cattle rather than pine nut forests. Not only has the destruction of piñon forests resulted in a dearth of pine nuts, but the fodder that replaced the trees supports livestock, a major contributor to global warming, according to a recent report by the United Nations entitled *Livestock’s Long Shadow*.

Both livestock ranching and smelters took a heavy toll on trees that take decades to mature and whose cones require at least two seasons to produce nuts. Serious additional problems resulted from the destruction of piñon trees, trees that Frazier calls “the

keystone of this desert region.” With the loss of piñons and their cooling effect on the soil from the water they hold and the shade they provide, the temperature of the soil rises, adds Frazier. Such interference with water and temperature abetted a beetle infestation and fires that, in turn, contributed to the death of millions more piñons. Sadly, due to the collective abuses suffered by our native piñon forests, pine nut production this year has collapsed.

The lack of native pine nuts will negatively affect wildlife that rely on them, says Katie Fite, Biodiversity Director of Western Watersheds Project (<http://www.westernwatersheds.org>). She points out that “...native wildlife species that rely on pine nuts—pinyon jay, juniper titmouse—and even mule deer that eat pine nuts—may be in dire traits—as well as migratory species such as Clark’s nutcrackers....”

Frazier wonders why American taxpayers are supporting the beef industry’s subsidies for grazing on land suitable for piñon forests since revenues from pine nut production could exceed revenues from grazing by more than 100 times. She says, “...pine nuts are 28 times more earth efficient in terms of acreage used to produce...protein than beef.” Like all nuts, pine nuts are nutritionally outstanding. They are rich in minerals, and their protein content is among the highest of all nuts.

The hefty price of native pine nuts reflects the effort required to pick and process them. A thick tar that oozes from the cones plus shelling and drying the nuts challenge individual pine nut pickers. In Nevada one can pick up to 25 pounds of pine nuts without a permit. Collectors are warned to wear bright clothing because the nut harvest coincides with hunting season.

I wasn’t able to find shelled American pine nuts anywhere. Pricey unshelled American pine nuts that I ordered last year from the American southwest arrived in a cloth bag. First, I roasted them. Then, around a bowl of roasted pine nuts, several of us cracked open and savored each delicious nut.

Both imported and homegrown pine nuts impart a rich, sensuous flavor to any dish. Pine nut aficionados will tell you that there is nothing as delicious as the flavor of pine nuts in combination with greens, garlic, olive oil, and pasta. Pine nuts are the traditional nuts used in pesto, although most other nuts are tasty in pesto, too.

Our depleted American piñon forests need help if they are ever to be re-established and their nuts are to become once again a viable crop. There is hope. A promising pilot project to manage piñon-juniper ecosystems mainly for nut production was initiated by the Institute for Culture and Ecology in 2007. It is funded by a collaboration of Colorado’s Forest Service, Colorado State University, the USFS, and the BLM in Colorado. Its interactive web site, coordinated by Frazier, will provide nut harvesters, buyers, land managers, and scientists a place to share information about piñon crop locations and yields, prices, and methods for improving nut production. Frazier is pleased that those who have the power to effect changes are participants.

Resources: Information on American pine nuts: www.pinenut.com

“*Livestock’s Long Shadow*”: <http://www.fao.org/ag/magazine/0612sp1.htm>

Project to manage piñon forests for nut production: <http://www.pinonnuts.org>