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FORAGING TOURISM AS PRODUCTIVE NOSTALGIA: AN EMBODIED RESPONSE TO CHANGING CLIMATES?

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INTRODUCTION

The gathering of wild food holds a long history within subsistence societies. In recent times across the Global North, however, foraging has come to refer to the collection of ‘wild’ foods, generally by those who otherwise possess secure food sources (Hall, 2013). Interest in this latter form of foraging has come and gone since the first foraging guides were written in the late 1700s. At present we’re experiencing somewhat of a rise in interest – particularly among individuals between 20-30 years, living in urban areas (Price, 2014). This is largely influenced through turns towards notions of localism and food system alienation (Mabey, 2006). With this most recent revival, has come the availability of foraging courses. That is, courses led by an experienced (or, so called ‘professional’) forager – who leads attendees through a specific environment, sharing knowledge and expertise on how to find, harvest and prepare food and drink from the surrounding flora. The identity of the professional forager is demonstrated and brought to life through performing their practice, skills and knowledge of foraging in front of others during the course.

Foraging courses are diverse in their offerings and do not fit neatly into notions of tourism. Likewise, attendees on such courses would not necessarily perceive themselves as tourists – many attending courses close to their place of residents, for example. Nevertheless, many foraging courses are marketed and designed for individuals visiting an area and are often bound up in destination marketing strategies aimed at enabling visitors to connect with place. While the relationship between foraging and tourism is far from clear cut, foraging courses are entwined within the production and consumption of contemporary tourism. Mainstream media often treat professional foragers and such courses sensationally – claiming that understanding foraging as a form of environmental practice is not only an inadequate response to changing climates, it is actually a potentially unsustainable practice (Hall, 2013).

This exploratory paper maps the personal motivations prompting a rising in foraging courses. In doing so, the paper specifically aims to examine relations between tourism, foraging, and sustainability, evaluating the potentials of this form of tourism in facilitating sustainable practice and discourse.

METHOD

A post-structuralist approach was used to understand the ways individuals to understand the ways individuals both construct and transgress notions of tourism, foraging and sustainable practice.

Observant participation was undertaken at five foraging courses in the Scottish Highlands, providing insight into the motivations of both attendees and guides.

Semi structured interviews conducted with professional foragers generated insights into the professional dimensions of foraging, as well as ways the foraging course unfolded.

A media analysis was used to characterise the sets of ideas drawn on in broader discussions of foraging tourism.

Following the poststructuralist framework, a Foucauldian discourse analysis was used to understand the ways individuals' motivations and performances make and remake broader social structures; specifically, the ways structures are generated in society, and the ways through which individuals both trouble and reinforce broader structures. Alternative forms of discourse analysis, such as semiotic analysis have, by contrast, been noted as limited in their ability to understand the role of agency, as possessing potential to both (re)confirm and trouble broader structures (Hannam & Knox, 2005).

Results and discussion will be presented through three themes – the personal politics of professional foragers, edifying encounters and reconceiving practice.

THE PERSONAL POLITICS OF PROFESSIONAL FORAGERS

The motivations guiding individuals to become professional foragers were complex. Narratives broadly aligned, however, in their use of nostalgic narratives that stood in opposition to contemporary food systems and practices:

I'm determined to debunk the notion that this is all about fine-dining and Michelin stars. Foraging is simply about finding food in order to feed ourselves and our families. It's about eating to live – and most of us in the UK have got out of the habit and lost the skill. Agriculture is 10,000 years old but we've only had shops for a few hundred years. Human beings are hardwired as foragers, it's what we've always done, it's really just gone out of fashion, so we've got out of the habit. (Mark Williams, Professional Forager, male, Galloway, Interview with Clark (2013)).

Whilst a sense of romanticised loss is central to this narrative, nostalgia here illustrates care, directed towards the contemporary food system. Nostalgia is intimately connected and complicated by the potentials of foraging as a future oriented, contemporary practice – viewed as a way to respond to environmental disconnections. Rather than nostalgia articulating something that is gone for good, the past was deployed as a way to reimagine future directions in complex ways (Bonnett, 2016).

EDIFYING ENCOUNTERS

Professional foragers utilised the space of the foraging course to impart political ideals. To facilitate (re)connection, professional foragers again drew on nostalgic environmental narratives in various ways with the aim of positioning foraging as both a familiar practice and a pragmatic response to contemporary political issues of consumption. Andy Hamilton, by way of example, spoke of beginning courses with a series of provocative questions:

One of the first things I ask the groups of people who I take out foraging is whether or not they have foraged before. Most will say no, and then I ask if they have picked a blackberry or an apple from a tree. Suddenly most of the group are in agreement that they have not only been foraging but they have been since they were children. (Andy Hamilton, Professional Forager, male, Bristol, BBC (2010)).

The moment of recollection Andy seeks to evoke draws on nostalgic imaginings of childhoods' spent fruit picking in idyllic rural landscapes. Such characterisations are dependent upon romanticised and Westernised constructions of childhood. In drawing on these normative ideals – familiarity through childhood connections works to break down contemporary understandings of foraging as an alternative, unusual practice. Nostalgic

narratives are thus reconfigured as something productive and future focused, rather than reductionist and backward looking.

The following statement from Arthur works at a broader scale, yet similarly provides insight into the motivations and ways through which professional foragers sought to facilitate belonging between attendees and the environment through nostalgic narratives:

It is the very skills I practice that provide me with grounding and peacefulness in these times. These ancestral technologies provide a means to attain health and disentrall people from the wage slavery that suppresses their true selves. I propose that any solutions that are offered must come from the understanding that we are infused with seven million years of hominid history that has shaped our physical bodies and patterned our ways of thinking. (Arthur Haines, Professional Forager, Interview with author).

Again we can understand how nostalgic constructions of the past, here ‘ancestral technologies’, are conceived as ways to respond, or live ‘peacefully’ with, contemporary social dilemmas relating to health, the environment and the self. There is a politics for Arthur, through imparting knowledge of ‘wild living’ through teaching – grief, directed towards things as they once were and now are, is productively reimagined as hope for things as they could be. Past, present and future, therefore, become entangled through the foraging course, as well as nostalgic narratives, as a way to become hopeful for the future.

The narratives of nostalgia evoked by professional foragers are romanticised and idyllic. And it is crucial to recognise these are the voices of white, Western, and predominantly male individuals. They draw on simplified ideas relating to how we should be responding to our changing climates that overlook the time and economic constraints many possess – that inhibit abilities to enact differing practices. Yet, at the same time, these narratives are of interest because they were affective in engaging and edifying attendees with environmental practices that offered pragmatic ways to curtail the ontological realities of the contemporary food systems.

Beyond foraging and climate change, nostalgia is often used politically to initiate change and shared identity. Trump’s campaign, by way of example, was driven by the nostalgic notion that change is required to make America great *again* – as if it once was. This nostalgia clearly connected with particular individuals during the campaign – and a perceived, desired national identity for a future US. Understanding the way nostalgia serves to empower certain individuals and enacts action, is thus politically important.

RECONCEIVING PRACTICE

Turning now to the perspectives of attendees on foraging courses. As with foraging professionals, foraging attendees were aware of, and troubled by, the association of foraging as a middle class leisure pursuit; it was an understanding that worked to push individuals interested in undertaking foraging away from taking up the practice:

In the past I have been uninterested in foraging as I thought it was just slightly faddish nonsense. We’ve reached a strange moment when foraging is firmly associated with upper class food. However, perhaps, this was something I could learn and pass on. (Lucy, female, London).

Foraging’s contemporary positioning is not straightforward. Nostalgic narratives are cross-cut with classed consumerism, due in part to the recognition of wild-to-table influenced restaurants. It was interesting that despite the aims of such restaurants to increase the practice

of foraging, for the participants of this study such approaches served as a deterrent. Rather, in our fieldwork, it was the nostalgic narratives that enabled attendees to move past foraging's 'negative' characterisations as upper classed – to reconceive the practice as something potentially productive.

Learning was conceived as an embodied process, involving a retraining of both the body and social convention. Attendees came to understand the ways normative social performances become reimagined in enacting the foraging identity. Interestingly, while attendees understood the learning process to largely involve rethinking embodied practice, professional foragers spoke little on this theme, focusing more on the political discourses driving their practice. Nevertheless, for the attendees, focus was on learning to interact, view and sense the non-human differently, so as to train the senses to find food rather than architecture or landscapes:

Once your brain registers that there's food out there, it starts interacting with the environment in a different way. What was once just a green jumble in every unmown verge has begun to gain focus for me. (Nathanael).

Learning to perform, view and sense differently provoked surprising discoveries in previously 'familiar' environments:

The blossoms of cherry trees taste like marzipan! I have seen these, every single spring of my life and never thought to eat these tiny flowers. Amazing! (Sarah, female, London).

Here the familiar collides with the unfamiliar – creating elements of surprise. Surprise, in this encounter, represents Sarah's recognition that her previous forms of embodied environmental engagement inhibited her ability to become familiar with all dimensions of the environment. The introduction of taste, alongside the ingestion of the environment, brought into question understandings regarding what is known and unknown, familiar and unfamiliar.

While not all attendees experienced such transformative embodied encounters, tasting foraged foods often unsettled broader understandings relating to the normative constructions of contemporary tastes and modes of consumption:

We found mainly weeds that you can use in salads. It was interesting though that although it was all quite bitter, I didn't mind that. In fact, I could see it was appealing as there are so few foods these days that give you that bitter buzz. (Lucy).

We are trained to understand certain foods as tasting good, and others bad. Lucy's narrative highlights the ways learning to forage troubles normative constructions around what tastes good and why. The taste, and resulting joy, stemming from the bitterness caused a moment of reflection for Lucy, which resulted in the nostalgic recognition that the contemporary diet is largely absent of bitterness. Absence in this context presented both an enjoyment for something different, and more broadly, a moment of openness, directed towards the potential of the more heterogeneous tastes that foraging offers.

While many did not identify as foragers, following participation some did reflect on how both their practice and environmental conceptualisation shifted – resulting in varying levels of change in personal practice:

Eating weeds has allowed me to engage with the natural world in a new way. I chew on peppery nasturtium leaves on my way to work. When I'm making a sandwich and

realize we're out of greens, I just go outside and grab some. I pluck unfamiliar plants and take them home for identification. (Sophie).

These are really common weeds and it's so easy to go into the garden and use them rather than just swear at them. Foraging won't change my world. I won't ever become 'a forager' but I now have a practical basis from which to do a few things and that's all to the good. I feel more confident and empowered to engage in the plant world in a different way. (Nathaniel).

CONCLUSION

The findings presented here illustrate how foraging tourism has emerged through broader discourses of Western environmentalist nostalgia. Findings showed how foraging tourism rendered a space where attendees could learn embodied and discursive skills, that enabled the enactment of pragmatic responses to abstract issues relating to the unsustainability of contemporary food systems.

Foraging, in these narratives, was not presented as a panacea for affecting food sustainability. Rather, learning to forage was understood as an everyday practice providing a form of hope against feelings of powerlessness. Too often climate change discourses present answers through large scale approaches, that overlook the political and empowering potentials of everyday practice. Moreover, while small scale, individual practice is never only discrete and localised but rather networked and connected, part of broader transnational networks, where extra-local connections are vital social building blocks.

Nostalgia was used by professional foragers, and served as evocative in engaging course attendees. Nostalgia here was not reductive and backward looking but was rather utilised in a way that brought together past and present, as well as reimagined futures. Whilst these findings are useful in providing insight into the effects of nostalgic narratives, caution relating to the politics of representation and recognition of the power dynamics bound up with such narratives, is here crucial. Nostalgia is emotive because it draws on powerful normative, and potentially marginalising, sets of ideas in its construction. In this context, for instance, nostalgia drew on Westernised and Romanticised constructions of past ways of living, childhood and the environment that will resonate with very particular subjectivities. For this reason, attending to not only how nostalgia is productive, but whose version of nostalgia is evoked, is both relevant and crucial.

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