

to site, success at morel picking requires the ability to adapt.

David Arora, a renowned mycologist and writer from Santa Cruz with connections to OSU, is the author of *Mushrooms Demystified*, widely considered the bible of wild mushrooms. Arora is the first to admit that migrant pickers like the Red Van Crew can outpick experts like him:

"They are quintessential outsiders: figuratively, because they stand outside the mainstream, and literally, because they spend most of their waking existence outdoors. They are the latest (some say the last) incarnation of a wandering community as ancient as humanity itself — one that is nature-immersed and moves with the seasons ... Knowledge is acquired through days spent in the woods and is communicated orally ... trust and camaraderie are cemented and sustained through the exchange of nature — the buying, selling, and bartering of mushrooms — and just as importantly, from the exchange of stories about nature and mushrooms."

You won't find a shred of Gore-Tex or Capilene on the backs of most pro pickers, or

The core of the Mexicans' success, however, is simply the ability and willingness to walk farther than anybody else. While most pickers try to keep their rigs hidden from the road to hide their patch, the Mexicans pull their red van onto the gravel shoulder in a brazen cloud, and leave it there for all to see.

Anyone who sees that van knows there are mushrooms back there — way back there. Farther than anyone else will walk.

Hell, they'll even tell you where they're going. They truly don't care if you know. "We walk 'til we find a big patch," explains

Paco shivers with a blanket on his shoulders, recovering from an ill-fated attempt to float 200 pounds of mushrooms down the river on an air mattress. It seemed like a good idea at the time. They were picking near the river, and floating beats walking. But Paco hit a submerged log and spilled himself and his precious load. Accident notwithstanding, the team still loads several hundred pounds of mushrooms into their van. They drive into Tok to cash in, leaving me to scheme a way to realize my dream: to go picking with the Mexicans.

of buyers; if another buyer offers more, they'll sell to him. Southard lives in constant fear that another buyer will bribe, charm or otherwise compel the Mexicans to switch. Pickers compete for habitat, but buyers compete for pickers.

Further behind the scenes, the mushroom companies like Alpine Foragers Exchange and S&K Holdings that hire the buyers have their eyes on all the global hotspots producing morels. There are many productive burns in Canada's Yukon, for example, and the quantities coming out of Canada — or Turkey, or India — help determine the price brokers authorize their buyers to pay for morels in Alaska.

Each day I push farther into the thick bush. I don't know if the mosquitoes are afraid of me, or if I don't notice them anymore, but they plummet from my list of concerns as I bring back more and more mushrooms.

It's addictive, this foraging for profit — an ancient, powerful and intoxicating feeling. When your eyes adjust to morel-vision, it's amazing how far away you can spot one, and how large they loom.

You drop to your knees, one eye on the mushroom



The Red Van Crew poses along Taylor Highway.

Of all the tools available to pickers, eyes and legs seem to be the most useful, along with the ability to forget what you used to know and learn quickly from scratch.

a map, compass, or plant book among them. Yet they navigate the land comfortably and intimately.

"How do you figure out if habitat is good?" I ask Francisco.

"By looking at it," he says.

"It's always changing," he adds, after I roll my eyes.

"First we were finding them in burnt-out black spruce forests. Then we started finding them in the needles below white spruce growing in half-burnt aspen forests. Then we started finding them all over the barely burned aspen groves — even in green moss. They're always on slopes, though, usually south-facing."

Francisco. "Then we pick, load up and walk out. That's it."

The terrain "accessible" from the Taylor Highway offers some of the toughest bushwhacking I've ever experienced, but I'm determined to pick like a Mexican. Each day I go deeper, across muskeg bogs, over downed timber, underneath burnt snags (widowmakers) that remain standing only by force of habit, waiting for the slightest excuse to fall on my head. After a day of picking, I return torn and filthy, humbled by the Mexicans' cleanliness.

We are on the bank of the Dennison Fork of the West Fork of the Fortymile River, which empties into the Yukon east of Eagle.

Jay Southard is a buyer from Yamhill, Ore., who sets up next to the flea market in Tok. Southard's setup consists of a canopied table with a digital scale. A line of propane dryers stands behind him, ready for his next purchase. Southard is known around Tok as "the Mexicans' buyer."

I ask him if I can go picking with the Red Van Crew.

Southard explains that the Red Van Crew belongs to no one. Even though Southard helped with their travel arrangements, found them cabins with kitchens and running water, secured their famous red van, and picked them up at the airport, he has no control over their decisions, he says, or even their choice

you're about to pick, the other scanning for its friends. When that one mushroom turns out to be the leading edge of a huge patch, you love your life. You never want to be anywhere else. When you close your eyes to sleep, that patch comes back to haunt you on the backs of your eyelids.

By day, the quest for unpicked habitat continues. Pickers partner with locals, renting their ATVs and hiring them as boat pilots in order to reach the innermost reaches of the burn. But there's not enough turf to go around. A few pickers are successful, but most are barely covering their expenses.

One morning, the red van pulls into my camp. It seems even the Red Van Crew has

Sustainable Harvest?

Is commercial mushroom harvesting in Northwest forests sustainable and ecologically sound?

Environmentalists argue both sides: Wild mushrooms add to the diversity and value of ancient forests, providing another argument against clear-cutting; but the uncontrolled harvesting of sensitive plants raises serious concerns about maintaining healthy forests.

Research on the topic is sketchy due to the many variables that determine mushroom productivity, such as temperature, precipitation, fire and human activity. Creating study areas devoid of mushroom pickers is a challenge. And mushrooms themselves are astoundingly diverse and complex in their life cycles and their relationship to their environment.

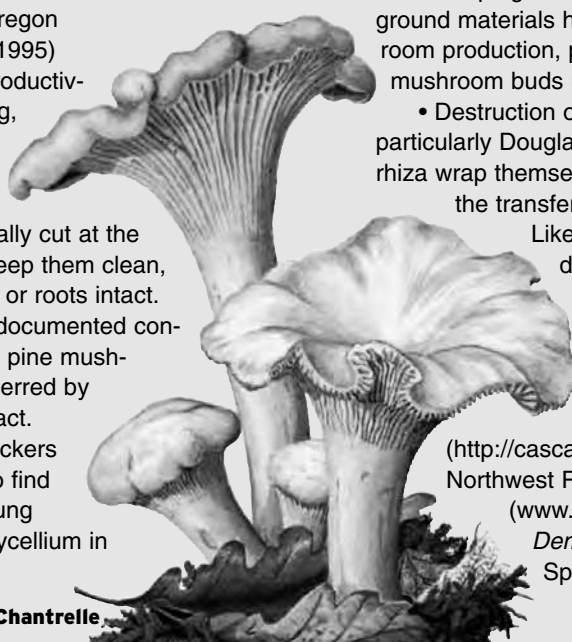
Below are some of the considerations that can be found in a brief survey of literature from the U.S., Canada and Europe on the subject:

- A 10-year study on the effects of harvesting

chanterelles by the Oregon Mycological Society (1995) found no decline in productivity following harvesting, regardless of the picking method. However,

chanterelles are typically cut at the base of the stem to keep them clean, leaving the mycelium or roots intact.

- The same study documented concern for the picking of pine mushrooms, which are preferred by buyers with stems intact. Some irresponsible pickers rake the forest floor to find the more valuable young fruit, damaging the mycelium in the process.



Yellow Chanterelle

- Commercial mushroom pickers are notorious for leaving garbage and human waste at their campsites and resting areas scattered deep in wilderness areas. Direct impact? Unknown.

- Tramping and compacting of mosses and other ground materials has been shown to reduce mushroom production, primarily through damaging young mushroom buds underground.

- Destruction of fungi beds can damage trees, particularly Douglas firs. Mushrooms called mycorrhiza wrap themselves around tree roots and facilitate the transfer of nutrients from soil to the trees.

Likewise, clear-cutting of forests can destroy fungi which are integral to the survival of thousands of plant and animal species.

For more information on local mushroom harvesting, contact the Cascade Mycological Society (<http://cascademyc.org>) or the Pacific Northwest Research Station in Corvallis (www.fs.fed.us/pnw), or read *Mushrooms Demystified* by David Arora, Ten Speed Press. — Ted Taylor