

Blasted Landscapes (and the Gentle Arts of Mushroom Picking)

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Continent-crossing commodity chains have become known for their environmental irresponsibility; they extract natural resources without any attempt to replenish natural landscapes. Instead of pursuing worst cases, this paper argues that the ecological dynamics of irresponsible extraction might also be illuminated by exploring a singularly benign example: the extraction of a commodity that flourishes in already damaged landscapes. Pursuing histories of radical disturbance here opens an otherwise suppressed question: How can humans live together with other species on an already damaged earth?

Matsutake are gourmet wild mushrooms picked in forests across the northern hemisphere for export to Japan. Matsutake thrive with pioneer trees on nutrient-poor soils. Such places are created by histories of radical disturbance—whether by human or nonhuman forces. In some cases, these forests are the ruins of modern production regimes or failed industrial resource management. Mushroom pickers make something from these multispecies histories of disturbance: To make money from mushrooms from such ruins suits a catch-as-catch-can neoliberal freedom best practiced by the displaced and disempowered. Humans as well as mushrooms live the disturbance in such sites.

This paper compares the disturbance histories that produce matsutake forests in four world areas (Japan, southwest China, the U.S. Pacific Northwest, and Finland). All four have joined a Japan-centered matsutake commodity chain. The comparison thus addresses the role of continent-crossing commodity chains in gleaning wealth from radical disturbance.