

Jim McGraw Says “Watch ‘Real Housewives’, not ‘Appalachian Outlaws’”

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I suppose I should be happy that our YouTube video “How to Steward Your Ginseng Population” has now reached the milestone of more than 20,000 views (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AQTUZocdUo>). And while views had been steadily increasing over the past 2 years, some disturbing blips appeared in ‘Google Analytics’ over the past couple of months:



It didn't take long to figure that the peaks correspond to episodes of ‘Appalachian Outlaws’, a reality TV program on the History Channel that chronicles the behavior of a number of tawdry characters involved in the ginseng trade (dealers, landowners, wild simulated growers, and local vs. out-of-state harvesters being the main ones). Viewers watching our stewardship video may be concerned landowners that want to learn how to protect their ginseng from the likes of the outlaws depicted on the show. If so, I am happy to oblige.

Unfortunately there is precious little a landowner can do if someone is determined to steal from another person's property. The video describes ways to ‘hide’ adult plants from harvesters, which works when harvest only occurs during the ginseng season. Law enforcement officers can be effective, and I encourage you to use them, but they are not likely to seek sufficiently aggressive measures to protect a small plant root from being dug out of season. And if landowners take the law into their own hands, they risk engaging in a never-ending war, once word gets out that ginseng is on their land, and they may end up on the wrong side of the law themselves.

What is a landowner to do? My best advice is to vow to yourself to never tell anyone about ginseng on your property. Silence and stewardship are your best allies. If you let family members know, be careful, and swear them to secrecy as well. The fate of your ginseng patch hangs in the balance.

What about Appalachian Outlaws? Is it a realistic depiction of the ginseng sub-culture of Appalachian culture? No, and yes. First, let's not forget that the show is for entertainment, so most of the interactions, which are really the focus of the show, are highly staged by non-actors who don't mind getting paid to embody caricatures. Unrealistic to downright silly Jerry Springer style conflicts are to be expected with this setup. Second, the show's producers routinely exaggerate the amount of money you can

get by harvesting ginseng, either as dealer or harvester. Showing the viewer small piles of ginseng collected after a few minutes of following a harvester through the woods terribly misrepresents the amount of time it takes diggers to find a patch of ginseng, let alone the work it takes to carefully remove roots from the soil. In addition, as I walk in the woods, I rarely hear twangy, Deliverance-style music being played.

On the ‘yes’ side, it is unfortunately true that many diggers are ‘outlaws’, in the sense that they are quite willing to dig plants illegally. Most often, this comes in the form of trespassing; after all, most harvesters are not landed gentry, having to rely instead upon the land of others. In addition, as the show suggests, it may well be the competition among ginseng diggers and dealers that drives diggers toward outlaw behavior. This is called the “tragedy of the commons”, whereby given a limited resource (ginseng in the forest ‘commons’), it ‘behooves’ a harvester to take more ginseng, or take it out of season, or on somebody else’s property, because if he/she doesn’t, the next digger will. In the absence of competition, a harvester would not be driven to do what they know is wrong (harvest too early, steal from a neighbor, or harvest plants that have produced no berries).

Does the show Appalachian Outlaws itself threaten ginseng, by selling ginseng as a ‘get rich quick’ proposition? I suppose this depends on how popular the show is, but honestly I am not too worried about the ‘wild’ ginseng. Even though it is highly sought after and valued, someone who thinks they are going to get rich quick will just as quickly learn otherwise.

I am more worried that forest landowners who have planted and lightly tended large ginseng patches for 5 or even 10 years will be more likely to get poached because Appalachian Outlaws brought unneeded attention to the plant. This is truly sad, because if these forest ‘cultivators’ and ‘conservators’ are put out of business, that will bring all the more pressure to bear on the wild populations. On top of this, the forest growers I know are good people, just trying to find a way to keep mature woods on their land while making a little extra money.

What to do? In my opinion, we should all simply **stop watching Appalachian Outlaws**. Just boycott it. The History Channel can’t sell advertising if there is no audience. So, for the good of ethical ginseng diggers, landowners, and the future of wild populations everywhere, if you must groove on manufactured human drama, please, watch Real Housewives of Orange County.