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- [Email the Editor](#)
- [Full Table of Contents](#)
- [Back Issues](#)
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- [NRDC Membership](#)

[Email This Article](#)

## FEATURE STORY

### Oregon's Secret Harvest

Page 3

The next morning I arrive earlier at the Chemult ranger station. Inside I'm greeted by Rick Bond, a burly forest ranger with a thick mustache who leads me through the warren of offices. In one I see a line of pickers awaiting their turn to register and pay for licenses. At \$100 per month, the permits will allow them to harvest in four adjacent national forests: Deschutes, Fremont-Winema, Umpqua, and Willamette. "This gives them a couple of million square miles where they can pick," says Bond.

And how much do the pickers make? No one is very forthcoming -- it's a cash business, after all -- but I saw buyers more than once paying out a few hundred dollars for a day's take. For those on the circuit it's obviously a sustainable livelihood -- it pays for their food, their pickup, their gas, and, when the forests are flush, for more. But it's an unpredictable living, dependent on weather and the still poorly understood nature of the mushrooms. Many pickers tell me that they couldn't work in the city. They feel free and at home in the forests. Most of the pickers are middle-aged, many are couples, and some travel with their extended families -- college-age men, mostly, who pick to earn money for school.

There's someone Bond wants me to meet. "One of the most important things we've done is hire Koy," the ranger says. "She speaks five languages," he tells me proudly, "Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and English. She is also a picker herself, and at night she works for a buyer."

He leads me into a large classroom where a compact, squarely built thirty-something woman in a light blue windbreaker paces, coffee cup in hand, before a man in his early twenties. Boun Thiene Xaivong, newly arrived from Chico, California, is getting the orientation lecture required before a permit is issued. Koy Chounabout delivers the presentation in Khmer, illustrating each of her points with slides beamed on a screen from an overhead projector.

I don't speak Khmer but I've sat through orientation lectures before, and the slides are like those in a driver's education

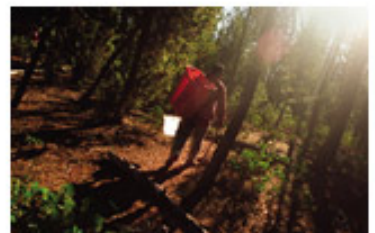
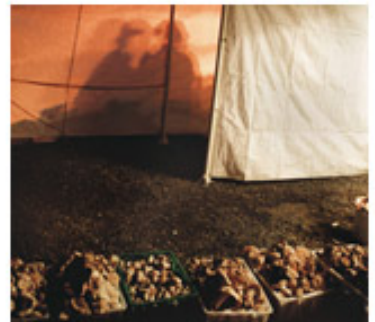


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#### ◀ SLIDESHOW

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course -- crude but clear. A photograph of documents, I assume, means it's necessary to have the proper permits; a cigarette with a slash through it means no smoking, although a photograph of pickers smoking by their cars means smoking is okay on the road. A photograph of a matsutake shows that the cap must have a diameter of at least 1.5 inches.

Harder to follow are the proper procedures for picking. I gather, though, that it's bad practice to rake away the pine needles to find mushrooms; instead they should be pried loose from the ground, ideally with a thin, metal-pronged weed puller. No spades or shovels are allowed. And once the mushroom is removed from the ground, the digger must close the hole back up and cover it.

Boun Thiene Xaivong stands, takes a sheaf of papers from Koy -- maps of the area and all the instructions she just gave him, written in Khmer -- and heads off to get his permit. As he leaves, more pickers come into the room, and Koy gets ready to begin her lecture again. I ask her if she'll show me around the pickers' camp, and she tells me to meet her at Crescent Junction in the evening.



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Page: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#)

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Photos: Antonin Kratochvil

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