

*This was a guest editorial in the Spokane (Wash.) Spokesman-Review August 1, 2006. It was written by Kara Briggs, Yakama, Senior Fellow of the American Indian Policy and Media Initiative.*



## ***HIGH HUCKLEBERRY DEMAND HURTS TRIBE***

*By Kara Briggs*

The huckleberries are ripening in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, but this isn't a guide to finding secret patches.

As a Yakama and a North Idaho property owner, I am deeply concerned about the future of this sweet-tart wild purple berry. I fear if we continue merchandising berries, we may see the huckleberry decline and face extinction as the wild salmon has.

In recent years, busloads of commercial pickers have routinely descended on ripening berry fields in Western Washington and Oregon and stripped the bushes of berries before anyone else could share in the harvest.

The pressure on huckleberries in Eastern Washington and North Idaho doesn't appear to be as severe at the moment. But as our population grows regionwide, and as an increasing number of gourmet products containing the berries fill shelves at stores, we must pay attention to this relatively fragile harvest.

The wild huckleberry cannot support the pressure from hundreds of small businesses and restaurants in the way that farmed strawberries or blueberries can. The work of area universities toward farmed huckleberries raises a whole different specter of concerns, as farmed salmon raise for the health of wild salmon.

Yet with the advent of large-scale commercial picking, a flurry of recipes gushing about the wild flavor of huckleberries have appeared in publications, such as Southwest Airline's Spirit Magazine. Articles such as the one promoting a mechanized picker for huckleberries that appeared in The Spokesman-Review on July 2 run without mention of the concerns voiced by tribes.

Consistently at meetings of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, leaders decry the picking of declining berry crops for anything other than personal use or tribal ceremonial use.

Huckleberries are sacred to Northwest tribes. We hold ceremonies to mark their ripening. For millennia we have tended the berry fields, which, like the salmon, are protected by our treaties. Still over the last century, the fields have been taken over by private property, by state agencies and, particularly, by the U.S. Forest Service, which manages our mountainous national forests.

The remaining huckleberry fields exist because tribes historically cleared trees and burned brush to let the life-giving light reach the berries. But most management of the fields has been abandoned. In forests where 40 years ago there were huckleberry fields, tall trees now shade the fields.

Tribal elders say these fields include those where they remember camping for weeks at a time each summer, as families picked berries. Those camping trips were about far more than the harvest of berries. Stories were told, perhaps, like those about the Inland Northwest tribes' trickster Coyote, whose exceedingly wise sisters were huckleberries.

In that time berries were carefully handled so none were wasted, and the bushes were left intact to bear another year. One reason for such great care was the belief that huckleberries could leave if they weren't treated respectfully.

Now many tribal elders wonder if that's happening.

The fate of the huckleberry may be in the hands of consumers, who choose to order that huckleberry daiquiri or cheese cake, and to buy soap, syrup and salad dressing made with the berries.

Claims on the University of Idaho Web site that commercial use of huckleberries is OK because the berries were a tribal trade item ignores the facts. Tribal women who historically traded in huckleberries undertook the physical care of the berry fields and also spiritual care through first fruit ceremonies.

Now it's up to us.

We, the taxpayers, can pressure the U.S. Forest Service and other governments to work with tribes in managing the huckleberry field, and enforce rules that require permits to be purchased for commercial huckleberry picking.

Regional national forests need to change contradictory rules that tell pickers that their huckleberries must be used at home. But they allow such a large volume to be picked – 30 gallons a season in the Idaho Panhandle National Forest and three gallons a day in the Colville National Forest – that they invite the sale of berries, particularly during times of high unemployment.

We, consumers, can decide to buy products made with renewable farm-raised berries. That will save for future generations the joyous experience of bursting a

teeth-staining huckleberry in your mouth after a long hot day of mountainside picking.

*The AMERICAN INDIAN POLICY AND MEDIA INITIATIVE is a grant-funded academic and professional project of the Communication Department at Buffalo State College. The Initiative's focus lies at the intersection of media, public policy and Native interests. The Initiative prepares and publishes commentaries, news, research and academic reports that offer original and authentic voices of and about Native America. Available online at [AmericanIndianInitiative.buffalostate.edu](http://AmericanIndianInitiative.buffalostate.edu)*