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# FORAGING AT THE EDGE OF CAPITALISM

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03.30.2023 | 14:00 CET

**ONLINE AND LIVE IN PÉCS, HUNGARY**

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The first EnvHum Talk of the UnivPécs 07.04.2022 13.00 CET

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## *Foraging at the Edge of Capitalism*

In my previous research in the Himalayas, Siberia, and Central Asia, I witnessed how foraging became a main source of income for an increasing number of families. In Tibet and Nepal, scores of collectors rush to the mountains each spring to collect yartsagunbu (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) – a caterpillar fungus worth more than gold. In Siberia, people collect berries and mushrooms and sell them along the roads, while others scavenge for scrap metal in abandoned Soviet factories or the tusks of the woolly mammoth in the thawing permafrost. In the Pamirs, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, people began collecting highland shrubs as firewood. When outside provisioning of oil and coal stopped, shrubs replaced them as source of energy.

In an era when the dream of a middle-class life based on a stable salaried job no longer seems viable, and in places where the welfare state is under pressure, has never existed or has vanished, foraging plays a key role. It contributes substantially to the livelihoods of particular social groups and, in some cases, of entire regions. Foraging as a basic economic activity and mode of subsistence goes beyond natural resources. Broadly understood as practices of collecting, scavenging and gleaning, foraging is a widespread phenomenon. It includes various practices from wild foods and dumpster diving in cities to aromatic and medicinal plants and scavenging the remains of industrial production. It simultaneously takes place in the margins and the (unregulated) vanguard of capitalism. It is a socio-environmental entanglement at the intersection of personal ambitions, market demands and conservation efforts. Contemporary foraging practices at the edge of capitalism invite us to rethink notions of the environment, commons, and ambitions to forge possible futures.

**Martin Saxer** is a Heisenberg fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, where he is leading the ERC project "Foraging at the Edge of Capitalism" (2022-2026). He received his PhD from Oxford University and was a postdoctoral fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. From 2015 to 2020, he led the ERC project "Remoteness & Connectivity: Highland Asia in the World". He is the author of two monographs: *Manufacturing Tibetan Medicine: The Creation of an Industry and the Moral Economy of Tibetanness* (Routledge 2013) and *Places in Knots: Remoteness and Connectivity in the Himalayas and Beyond* (Cornell University Press 2022) and directed three feature-length documentary films.