

American Ginseng: Joshua Albritton Interview

Audio Transcript

[Guitar music in the background: "Southbound" by Doc and Merle Watson, from *Classic Mountain Songs from Smithsonian Folkways*]

Narrator: Poaching remains a central problem in ginseng conservation. This is particularly true in Great Smoky Mountain National Park, where the terrain allows for wild American ginseng to grow and attracts poachers accordingly. Smithsonian curators sat down with Josh Albritton to talk about the ginseng conservation efforts he oversees in the park.

Albritton: So, I've been at the Smokies for about ten years.

Narrator: Josh began by explaining the importance of ginseng in his work.

Albritton: Well, it's a protected plant because it's poached, and it has, you know, good market value. So, being that, we're sort of the largest reserve. It's an important plant to monitor and protect. And, you know, we get poaching cases each year, and so there's a lot of pressure.

Narrator: Great Smoky has certain characteristics that have often made it a target for ginseng poachers.

Albritton: Very rugged terrain. There's a lot of— Because of the topography and elevation, there's a lot of microclimates, so there's a lot of habitat out there that is good for ginseng. The ginseng monitoring program started in the early '90s, and it's basically a relationship between us and the law enforcement division, where they confiscate roots that have been poached, and they have a general idea of where they come from. And then, after they're finished with their processing on their end, they get handed over to me, and then we in turn process them. We age them, and weigh them, and we mark them with a dye that shows up underneath a blue light. And then, we take them out – and I spend a lot of time in the back country searching for good habitat that is maybe a little harder to find.

So, we monument all of our sites, we know where all of them are, obviously, and I have them on somewhat of a rotation. I try to go— We have several sites. You know, I'd like to go back to every site every two years, but it doesn't work out exactly that way. But we keep track of how many we plant, how many of those roots maybe had an injury on them when we received them, and then in turn, how many of them survive the following year or two.

Narrator: Josh is also responsible for salvaging and replanting poached ginseng when possible.

Albritton: We get— Usually the law enforcement will keep a couple roots for evidence purpose, then all of the other ones will be turned over to me, and then at that point, when we process, we'll make the determination if the roots are healthy enough to warrant them to be put back in the ground. And ninety-five percent of the time they are. Occasionally you get— You always know the poachers who are maybe not as experienced, because you'll get trowel marks in the roots, just poor root health. But, by and large, we put almost everything back. It has to be pretty bad. I mean, my idea is you might as well give it a shot.

A little bit of information about our program. Early '90s is when it started. Since then, we've had over 100 reported cases, over 12,000 roots from 20 watersheds. I'll show you, over 8,000 roots have been replanted. I just think that, you know, a lot of the poaching, in some ways it's like a family tradition kind of thing. I think in some ways, you know, it's glorified through television programs. And I think too, you know, in Forest Service land you can get a permit, and you can collect legally, which is fine, but I think resources are depleted around the park, and I think, and the pressure— that puts more pressure on the park, because everyone knows that we've got it, and we've got a lot of it.

And then, this is a big issue right here, is that a lot of our replant sites have been repoached. So, that's a tough deal, because it just turns into this game of, you know, LE [law enforcement] gets them, we replant them, they poach them, and it's like this circle, you know. And so that's why, you know, the onus is on us to try and find, or on me, to try to find— to do due diligence to find good sites that are harder to find. There's only so much you can do, obviously, you know, but I've got a couple different things that I try and do, that kind of maybe help with that a little bit.

Narrator: Finally, we asked Josh about his views on the future of ginseng.

Allbritton: Based on what I've seen, in my ten years, good sized natural populations are really hard to find. There's repeated poaching, replant sites get poached, a lot. It seems to be like if it continues with current pressure, that— you know, is it going to be completely extirpated? I don't know about that, but it's going to be really hard to find, I think. You know, especially in bigger populations. A few here, a few there, but finding nice wild populations may be a tough thing to do.

[guitar music]