

Between Sex and Death - Unearthing charisma in Australia's Mycota?

Alison Pouliot

The smell of *Tuber melanosporum*, the prized Périgord truffle is somewhere 'between sex and death', according to one Australian forager. This fungus vies with Iranian caviar as one of the most expensive foods in the world. Australia's costly culinary predilections have driven a significant European truffle-growing industry since the 1990s.

Originating from Europe, Périgord truffles prefer soils and vegetation that don't naturally occur in Australia. The major environmental 'modifications' necessary to keep these fungi happy in unsympathetic conditions have sparked a renewal of the changes wrought by early nineteenth century pastoralism. In an age of permaculture and other gentle agricultural approaches that work in sympathy with the environment, the desire to grow these expensive gourmet flourishes trumps ecological sense.

Less well known is that Australia already has a vast number of native truffles. Almost every eucalypt lives in association with native truffles. Aboriginal Australians along with wallabies, potaroos, bettongs and their kin attest to their nutritional value. Australia potentially has the most megadiverse mycota in the world (with an order of magnitude more truffle species than Europe) yet biodiversity conservation seldom considers fungi. Fungi are more often listed under the EPBC Act as an environmental threat than as organisms worthy of conservation. This paper explores the irony that, in a land where wild nature is highly valued, in the case of fungi, the local organisms are absent from biodiversity protocols, while their imported counterparts are the subject of expensive programs for growth. As debates intensify about the dangers of species translocation, it might be time to look a little closer at what's growing beneath the backyard gum tree.

Bio

Alison Pouliot is an ecologist and environmental photographer. She works and lives between Australia and Europe and is currently completing a PhD at the Australian National University. Her thesis is titled, "A Thousand Days in the Forest: An Ethnography of the Culture of Fungi".