

Mushroom Harvest on the Lincoln District

By Sadie Campbell, Recreation Technician

In 2003, the Snow-Talon and Moose-Wasson wildfires burned approximately 36,300 acres on the Lincoln Ranger District. After the fire season came to a much-welcomed end, planning began for the aftermath in the burned areas. Along with discussions on salvage, roadwork, landslides, and public safety, the 2004 mushroom season was a topic at hand. The burned areas provided conditions for increased production of morel mushrooms, a type of mushroom collected around the world and highly valued for its unique flavor. Several Helena National Forest employees worked to prepare for the influx of visitors to the burned areas collecting mushrooms for both personal consumption and commercial harvest.

We began the planning process by reviewing management strategies and permitting systems from forests that had recently experienced large fires. The goal was to pull their findings together and develop a program somewhat consistent with other forests in the region, which were also anticipating a large number of mushroom harvesters in 2004. Our staff addressed issues such as disturbance to wildlife species, harvest in Wilderness and Research Natural Areas, camping, food storage, sanitation, weed spread, and conflicts between commercial and personal-use harvesters. Mitigation methods were developed and incorporated into the strategy and permit system to help minimize the possible impacts.

Consistency with other forests in the region was important because we knew many harvesters, especially commercial harvesters, rotate from one burned area to another in search of mushrooms. The commercial harvesters vary in ethnic background, and many do not speak fluent English, so we did not want the rules and regulations to change drastically with each forest they visited. Several drafts of the commercial harvest, personal-use, and commercial camping permits were reviewed and edited before a final version was sent to the printer. We hired additional personnel to help with the permitting process, and officials throughout the forest offered their assistance with patrols and law enforcement.

Cool temperatures delayed the emergence of morels until the latter part of May. Students on a field trip from the Lincoln School were among the first to harvest morels. They visited the Snow-Talon burned area to experience the changes that had occurred since the previous



Kids show off the fruits of their labor

fall and were excited about the opportunity to learn about the morels and found some to take home and sample the taste.

The Snow-Talon burned area, being the larger of the two burned sites at approximately 34,000 acres, attracted many of the early harvesters and hosted most of the harvest activity throughout the season. The Copper Creek drainage offered the best access into the Snow-Talon burned area and was abuzz with harvesters as well as people curious to witness the effects of the fire.

Personal-use gathering peaked during the early season prior to the influx of commercial gatherers, who arrived in July. The Helena National Forest issued 1,038 personal-use permits, which were free of charge. Gatherers of all ages and many families visited the burned areas and collected the morels, which were accessible from roads and trails. Kids and grown-ups alike enjoyed the opportunity to hunt for the fungal treasures and shared many of their favorite recipes with us. Most of the people gathering for personal use came from the near-by communities of Lincoln, Helena, Great Falls and Missoula. The Western Montana Mycological Society hosted their annual Memorial Day get-together at a

campground near the Snow-Talon burned site.

In early July, commercial harvesters came to the Lincoln Ranger District to purchase their permits and set out gathering the morels. With the increase in harvest activity, access to good harvesting locations became more of a challenge. The individuals issuing permits did an outstanding job educating the harvesters on issues specific to the area. The number of commercial permits issued totaled 283. Most of the commercial harvesters stayed in a commercial harvester camp near the Snow-Talon burned area and gathered morels in the Copper Creek area. However, in mid-July, at the height of the commercial harvesting season, many commercial harvesters also gathered morels in the Moose-Wasson burned area and stayed at a commercial harvester camp near the site. In all, 57 commercial camping permits were issued.

Two buyers set up stands in Lincoln. Many commercial harvesters complained about the small number of mushrooms they were finding in the two burned areas and the low rates that the buyers were willing to pay. In spite of this, some commercial harvester stayed in the area and gathered mushrooms until the end of August.