



coastal foraging



what is it?

Coastal foraging covers a wide variety of wild food available at the coast – plants, seaweeds, shellfish etc. It can be done everywhere from sea cliffs and dunes, out to the low tide point in the rocks, gullies and pools, as well as mudflats and estuaries. Coastlines offer an abundant and dependable habitat for foragers. For these reasons, throughout our history humans have often lived by the sea. Midden piles of shells from ancient coastal foragers are the evidence that remains, and attest to the importance of the seashore as a plentiful food resource.

Some coastal food remains common in our diets today, such as prawns and crabs, and even carragheen seaweed hidden as a thickener in anything from toothpaste to desserts; whilst others, still delicious and nutritious, like winkles have fallen off the radar somewhat.

Due to warming, acidification and pollution, ocean creatures and plant-life are impacted. It's important to always harvest sustainably. Also, with our current population, our coastlines couldn't provide enough foraging for everyone.

what are the benefits?

Coastal foraging can provide you with an abundance of truly nutritious food. In particular, shellfish offer a high energy return for little input, and other than some low-cost (or home-made) equipment, it's free! Seaweed can be easily harvested and is high in vitamins and minerals.

If we harvest sensitively, gathering wild food can be of great benefit to the environment, as we can avoid farmed or commercially-produced foods that require land, fuel, and other inputs. For example, if we must eat prawns, far better to have hand-harvested them ourselves than to buy prawns trawled from the ocean, with large amounts of other creatures thrown away as 'by-catch'.

Being near the sea can be a wonderful experience, away from screens and literally diving into another world of seaweeds and starfish. It can be a relaxing experience, nourishing to body and mind, and a great way to connect with nature. Some forageable species are also invasive, such as the Pacific oyster. So if we harvest these, we can help restore native populations.

Consuming wild food can instill a greater respect for the environment, reconnecting us to the origins of our food, and illustrating our dependency on nature for survival. It also highlights the importance of seasonality and offers an alternative to our current globalised food system, where we can buy anything at any time of year.



An area rich in mussels can provide a wonderful wild dinner with little foraging effort.

what can I do?

There are plenty of courses available, or you might find someone local on the shore you can talk to. Plan your trip around the tides - low tide is best, when pools, gullies and sands are exposed.

Safety: check the weather, and avoid mists or storms. Head out as the tide is receding, giving you plenty of time before it turns. For scrambling on rocks covered in spiky barnacles and slippery seaweed, beach shoes or sandals are great. For mudflats you'll need wellies – shells are sharp and can cut your feet. Beware the venomous weever fish, often in shallow water or rocky areas. If stood on, its spines can cause a few hours of intense pain. Also beware of quicksand in mudflats or estuaries, and cliffs – above and below.

It's best to go with someone, take a phone and tell someone where you're going and when you plan to be back. Always be sure of any wild food before you eat it. Beware of algal blooms, especially when foraging bivalves, which filter sea water for food, and are susceptible to contamination. Algal blooms can be the cause of serious shellfish poisoning. Ask local fishermen or your local Port Health Authority, or check local social media sites.

Coastal plants: some wild food plants are only found on coastlines and estuaries, such as sea kale and marsh samphire, while others, although not specifically coastal, seem to thrive on coasts. Marsh Samphire is delicious raw or steamed, especially with fish. Found in tidal mudflats, it can be challenging to harvest, but well worth it. Some of the most abundant wild greens can be found at the coast, such as the evergreen sea beet, or the young shoots of sea kale. Coastal plants are often more succulent than inshore plants, as it's their defense mechanism against the salty air. Sea buckthorn has medicinally beneficial berries – full of vitamins and omega oils.

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Seaweed: of the c. 640 UK seaweeds, all are edible, except one that grows too far out to forage – so nibble without worrying. Some are more tasty and nutritious than others, and some are worth taking time to find. Seaweed is a marine algae, not a plant, and contains a whole array of vitamins, trace minerals, amino acids, and iodine.

You need the landowner's permission to take seaweed, and a licence if foraging commercially. The UK coast is owned by the Crown, private landowners or charities. Most landowners won't mind a little seaweed harvesting.

Gather fresh seaweed that's attached, not floating or washed-up fronds that could be old. Don't pull it up by its 'holdfast'. It can regrow, so cut rather than pull. Choose species that are plentiful, and only harvest a small amount from each area. A basket or string / cloth bag works well as the holes let water drain out. To store your harvest you'll need to wash and dry it. You can store dried seaweed for a few years in airtight containers. Look for recipes for specific seaweeds.

Shellfish: you can collect shellfish in tidal waters, but there are laws on quantity, season, place, minimum size etc. for some species. See *Edible Seashore* (resources) for info. Always cook molluscs, to kill any nasties. Raw oysters are often farmed and checked for viral and bacterial infection. Cooking doesn't destroy algal toxins or remove heavy metals, so be sure the beach is clean, and there are no algal blooms.

Periwinkles are abundant and easy to cook – boil for c. 5 mins then pull them from their shells. Steam mussels with wine, cream and herbs, French style. Other molluscs are harder to find. Razor clams hide under the sand, and you need to



Kelp attached to rocks. Cut seaweed rather than pull it up, so it can regrow from the 'holdfast'.

find their holes. Pour salt over the hole, and (maybe) the clam will appear, which you must grab. Cockles also live under the sand, between low and high tide. Use a rake or your hands to dig around under the surface. Purify them overnight in salt water to wash out as much grit as possible.

Some of the best spots for crabs are rock-pools in the inter-tidal zone. Snorkel or walk around until you see one and grab it (avoiding the pincers), or put out a trap like a lobster pot. This is only allowed in certain areas, so check first. Put traps out at low tide and make sure they're securely attached. After 24 hours pull them up and see what you have. You can catch lobsters, crabs, prawns and even fish this way. If a female has eggs, or 'roe', leave her in the sea. For prawns you need a 'prawn net' or a prawn pot.

There's debate about the most humane way to kill crustaceans – drop them in boiling water or destroy their ganglia (nerve clusters) – by inserting a knife in a specific way. Kill them immediately or keep them in salt water until you get home. There are lots of great recipes online or in books.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/coastal-foraging for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- John Wright, *Edible Seashore*
- C Warwick-Evans, *the Seaweed Cookbook*
- Lisette Kreisler, *Ocean Greens*
- mcsuk.org/nearyou – find clean beaches
- seaweed.ie – info on seaweeds
- pioneerbushcraft.org/nature-articles/bushcraft-articles/coastal-foraging-molluscs-shellfish



It's possible to find a variety of crabs and lobsters in rocky coastlines around the UK.

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