



Where I work Željko Zgrablić

Photographed by Damir
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Truffles are socially and economically important in parts of Croatia. They can be worth up to €5,000 (US\$5,300) per kilogram. The truffle industry and related tourism provides jobs, supplements incomes and boosts local economies. It's not just about money, however; many people just love being out in the forest looking for them.

My fascination with fungi began at the age of six, when my father and grandfather began taking me out to hunt for game and to collect mushrooms near our home in Istria. Today, I focus mainly on truffles and other hypogeous fungi, which produce their fruiting bodies underground. I spend 50–100 days a year in the field with my dogs, collecting samples and data on the life cycles, ecology and geographical spread of fungi across Croatia. Here, I'm with my dog Masha. I love the work.

Thirty years ago, rainfall used to be more predictable across the year in Istria. Now, the climate is more extreme, and includes droughts. Truffles require a specific amount of water to grow. And warm winters have

increased the population of wild boars, which damage the soil and eat the truffles. The truffles are becoming harder to find.

Truffle plantations could take the pressure off natural habitats. There, the soil water content can be controlled, agricultural methods can be used to enhance production and boars can be kept out. We're studying the viability of farming black truffles, in part by experimenting with different ways to inoculate tree seedlings with their spores.

We're using DNA barcoding to identify fungi in soil from their spores and root-like mycelium in protected areas. We're finding that there are often many more species present than previously thought.

Our comparisons of areas with and without truffles could help to reveal why they grow in some areas but not others. Our work is also helping to show the importance of biodiversity in places such as the Adriatic islands of Brijuni National Park.

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Interview by Nic Fleming.