

A-HED

Humans Are Gobbling Up Acorns, Driving Squirrels Nuts

In South Korea, where health claims have provoked a surge in consumption, animal-rights activists patrol the forests to prevent foraging

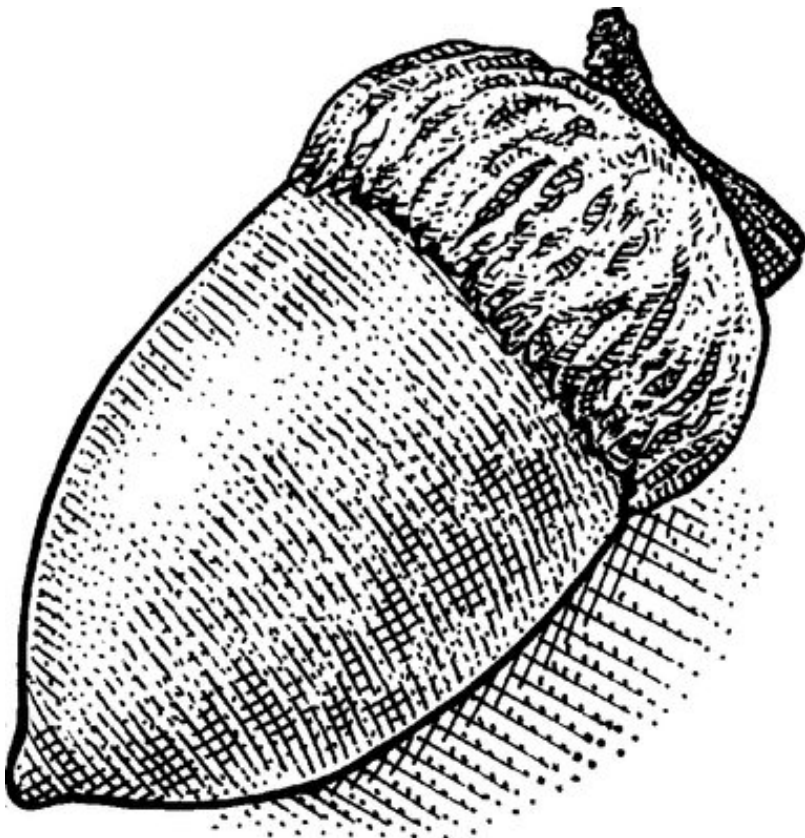
By Dasl Yoon and Na-Young Kim

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SEOUL—Look out, squirrels of the world. It turns out acorns are good for humans, too.

Here in South Korea, the popularity of acorn noodles, jelly and powder has exploded in recent years, after researchers declared the nuts a healthy “superfood” that can help fight obesity and diabetes.

In the U.S., where some Native Americans once made acorns a staple of their diet, restaurants and health-conscious blogs are starting to explore recipes for acorn crackers, acorn bread and acorn coffee.



It's what's for dinner.

That is bad news for squirrels and other animals that rely on oak trees for sustenance. In South Korea, where human foraging has multiplied, there are now fewer acorns on the ground, and the squirrel population has dwindled.



Acorn Rangers hide nuts under leaves for squirrels to find. PHOTO: DASL YOON/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Safeguarding acorns for squirrels is proving to be a tough nut to crack. That's where the Acorn Rangers come in.

Formed at Seoul's Yonsei University, the nascent Acorn

Rangers group polices the bucolic campus, scaring off other humans from swiping squirrel food. Taking up the cause are students like Park Ji-eun, who skipped lunch on a recent day so a squirrel could eat this winter.

Strolling across campus, Ms. Park, a junior, sprung into action after spotting an acorn assailant: a woman in her early 60s, clutching a plastic bag stuffed with the tree nuts.

"The squirrels will starve!" barked Ms. Park, her voice booming so loudly that other acorn hunters—human ones—scurried away. The two argued for nearly an hour until Ms. Park emerged with the plastic bag in hand.

She considered the exchange a hollow victory, even after placing the nut trove back under dozens of leaves. "I was thinking about all the other acorns that are lost," Ms. Park says.

Foraging for ingredients grown in the wild, like acorns, has become a bigger problem at South Korea's tree-packed college campuses and popular hiking trails. Over the past five years, there has been a fivefold increase in criminal charges for illegal gathering of "forest products,"

according to the Korea Forest Service. The few violators ever caught in the act face up to five years in prison or a maximum fine of roughly \$40,000.



Acorn Rangers have a picnic. PHOTO: ACORN RANGERS

“With acorns being advertised as a superfood, people won’t stop,” said Kim Soo-ji, who works at the South Korean government’s forest environment conservation division.

A squirrel needs to obtain, then bury, more than 100 acorns to survive the winter, experts say. If the human foraging continues, most of South Korea’s acorns will be gone in the next 50 years, according to Park Chan-ryul, a researcher at the National Institute of Forest Science. “We should sympathize with the squirrels’ hardship,” Mr. Park says.

At Bukhansan National Park, a popular hiking destination in Seoul, a team of 200 employees and volunteers are now deployed to catch nut thieves. One year the confiscated acorns totaled nearly 450 pounds, such a large haul that they used a helicopter to redistribute the loot for the squirrels.

South Korean universities and national parks have even set up “acorn deposit boxes” to raise awareness among hikers and others. But despite the ongoing push, the grounds are still littered with empty acorn heads.

“We can’t catch all of them,” says Min Woong-ki, the Bukhansan park’s resource conservation manager.

South Korea imports roughly 9,000 tons of acorns a year from China. Foraging locally comes free—even if the endeavor can create some family strife.

“My children tell me I’m mean for taking food away from the squirrels,” said Shin Kyung-ja, 58, who sells homemade acorn powder online from nuts she finds near her home.



An 'acorn disposal box' at Yonsei University. PHOTO: NA-YOUNG KIM/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Raw acorns eaten in large quantities can be harmful to humans, as they contain tannins, but the toxins can be eliminated by soaking or boiling.

Acorn consumption began centuries ago in Korea as an alternative source of food during a famine or poor harvest. South Koreans don't eat acorns raw. Over the years, they

concocted a popular acorn dish—called dotori muk—which requires soaking dried acorns for days to eliminate the bitter taste.

The acorns get mashed up and the starch boiled. They are eventually eaten as thin gelatinous blocks with a light drizzle of soy sauce and scallions. The process can take up to a week. Other acorn dish variants include noodles, pan-fried pancakes and dumplings.

The delicacy dishes became more of a staple item three years ago after South Korean researchers proved acorns can scientifically prevent diabetes, says Jeon Eun-bok, a nutritionist at 365mc, a diabetes treatment center in Seoul.

As the humans feast, the squirrels starve. South Korea's squirrel population has declined around 30% over the past decade, according to a 2018 wildlife report by South Korea's National Institute of Biological Resources that cited the dearth of acorns as a principal culprit.

The Acorn Rangers, formed last year, confiscate and collect acorns, which they stash in wooden boxes around campus and then every week place them back on the ground. Membership comes with some tight rules: They must avoid wearing perfume and keep their hands clean, as squirrels are sensitive to strong scents.



Korean acorn jelly. PHOTO: ALAMY

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What's your favorite acorn recipe? Take your time. Join the conversation below.

For their first official meeting last year, the Acorn Rangers gathered at a restaurant specializing in acorn noodles. Before eating, the students demanded the waitress give them assurances the acorns were imported from China.

“Humans can choose from thousands of different foods, but the squirrels only have acorns,” said Sa Sin-won, the founder of Acorn Rangers, which as

volunteers have no legal authority to punish culprits.

Some violators dart away with

their stash. Others hurl acorns after being confronted. To establish more credibility, the Acorn Rangers have recently taken to wearing neon vests.

The activists spend an hour every week hiding the acorns, by hand, back under tree leaves. A windy day can nullify their work.

The work is far from thankless, says Mr. Sa, the Acorn Rangers founder. The ultimate payoff comes when they see a squirrel climb down a tree and collect a returned acorn. To date, Mr. Sa says, he's seen it happen once.