

Natural Food Acquisition Policy in Washington, D.C.: A Regulatory Overview from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present



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Introduction/Abstract

Over the past century, Washington D.C.'s natural food acquisition policies (governing hunting, fishing, and foraging) have grown steadily more restrictive, driven by conservation concerns, public health crises, urban development, and public safety, rather than by any single cause. This paper traces that history from the late nineteenth century to the present, arguing that once-loosely regulated subsistence practices were restricted gradually and independently, producing a century-long narrowing of access to natural food acquisition, even as demand and potential benefits have never fully disappeared.

Methods

- Source Types: Federal statutes, DC Code provisions, congressional acts, NPS regulations (CFR), commissioner orders, and case law
- Date Range: Late 19th century to present
- Thematic Organization: Sources organized chronologically into three thematic categories (hunting/fishing; foraging; D.C. governance and codification)
- Governance Context: Sources were drawn from three governing bodies that shape DC policy (Congress, the District government, and the National Park Service) to capture the full regulatory history

Timeline

Hunting was curtailed early and completely (1906), driven by public safety and bird protection. Fishing tightened gradually, shifting from conservationist motives (1898, 1927) to environmental health concerns (later advisories). Foraging was never directly regulated but instead ignored or restricted indirectly in favor of civic beauty, first through park preservation mandates (1890), then USDA guidance against urban fruit trees (1949), and finally the Tree Space Beautification Regulation Act (1989). One exception came in 1960, when the NPS permitted berry picking, possibly driven by the "Mission 66" program to boost visitation. Gradient entries reveal how policies affected multiple activities at once. Together, the timeline shows a century-long arc toward restriction, with each activity following a distinct path toward the same outcome.



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Next steps

This paper establishes the regulatory history of hunting, fishing, and foraging in DC, but several questions remain. Future research should examine how development planning, interstate cooperation, and environmental issues beyond water pollution shaped these policies. The most pressing question concerns racial equity. These restrictions were not, on their face, about limiting food access among marginalized communities, but rather about conservation, public safety, and welfare. However, neutral policies can produce racially disparate outcomes. Reconciling this history of well-intentioned restriction with DC's documented history of racially unequal access to land, parks, and waterways will be the central challenge for the next phase of this research.

To learn more about this, scan the QR code to view the extended list of Natural food Acquisition Policy in DC



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