

CEESP/SSC Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group

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Unlocking the potential of wild edibles

By Teresa Borelli and Danny Hunter

Many wild edible species are disappearing due to environmental pressures or to neglect as populations worldwide move away from traditional food systems towards more simplified and energy-rich diets and become averse to consuming traditional dishes that are perceived as “food for the poor”, only to be drawn upon in times of food scarcity.

To reverse this trend and unlock the full potential of wild edibles, the Biodiversity for Food and Nutrition project (BFN Project) - is working with the governments of Brazil, Kenya, Sri Lanka and Turkey – four countries that are biodiversity hotspots – to promote the conservation and sustainable use of nutritionally-relevant local biodiversity. The project, which is funded by the Global Environment Facility and the CGIAR (Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centres) Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH) research programme, managed by Bioversity International and implemented by the United Nations Environment Programme and the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, is doing so by exploring the nutritional properties of a select number of species in each country and building on pre-existing work to identify a list of traditional and/or neglected foods with nutrition potential.

One such example is the Plants for the Future initiative in Brazil, which has identified hundreds of species of economic potential that require further characterization. Termites, roots and tubers, leafy vegetables, mushrooms and wild fruits are some of the current contenders from the four countries that, if suitable, will form the basis for an approach to improve dietary diversity: one that puts traditional, culturally-acceptable and nutritious food at its core.

Within each country, national BFN project coordination units are in the process of setting up collaborations that bring together the agriculture, health, environment and education sectors in each country in order to integrate information and knowledge of nutrient-dense foods generated by the project into national policies, programmes and strategies addressing food security and nutrition. There is already fresh recognition in the four countries, as well as worldwide (1), of the important role of traditional and wild foods in food and nutrition security policies and programmes. Only last month Brazil launched the Agroecology and Organic Production Plan with a US\$ 8.8 million budget in support of initiatives relating to the access, use, conservation and management of natural resources, with special emphasis on local biodiversity, including plans for the nutritional characterization of 40 indigenous species of Brazilian flora of current or potential economic value and the role that these may play in promoting food security and healthy diets. The remaining three countries are not far behind with national biodiversity action plans that recognize the importance of conserving wild foods and indigenous varieties and promoting food security strategies that revitalize regional food production and distribution in areas where price and production volatility, and hunger and malnutrition are rife.

As well as promoting exchange, sharing and learning among countries, evidence generated by the project on the importance of wild edibles will be shared with a much wider international arena for greater impact. Given the current level of interest in food and nutrition security and in bridging agriculture and conservation, the BFN Project can play a pivotal role in moving forward the agenda of wild biodiversity. To this end it will link with the [Cross-cutting initiative on biodiversity for food and nutrition](#) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which aims to promote the sustainable use of biodiversity in programmes contributing to food security and improved human nutrition as well as contribute to the [Aichi Biodiversity Targets](#) of the CBD, particularly Target 13 on the conservation of both wild and cultivated biodiversity. Important information on the nutritional value of wild foods can be found in a recent open access article in Sustainability (2).

The Project also informs the FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture which is tasked with drafting the First Report on the [State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture](#) due to be published in 2017. The report will provide a full description of the state of conservation and use of the world's biodiversity for food and agriculture and of its current and potential contributions to human well-being.

Since many of these species occur inside and outside protected areas, collaboration will also be



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sought with landscape conservation initiatives that go beyond park boundaries and engage with communities, NGOs and other stakeholders to sustainably manage these resources and avoid over-exploitation. Particularly important will be strengthening collaboration with IUCN and highlighting the importance of wild biodiversity conservation and use at the forthcoming [2014 IUCN World Parks Congress](#).

To raise awareness of the importance of wild and cultivated biodiversity, examples of best practices that are successfully linking the sustainable use of wild and cultivated biodiversity to nutrition outcomes are being collected and showcased in the BFN project [website](#) encouraging conservation and nutrition practitioners to implement similar cross-cutting initiatives in different geographical contexts.

A number of recommendations have been developed to inform the above-mentioned initiatives of the importance of wild edibles; among them:

- Encourage research that examines the relative contribution of wild foods to local diets and nutrition.
- Improve understanding of the risks associated with over-harvesting wild edibles and changes to access as they become more valuable.
- Raise awareness of the benefits and promote the consumption of nutritious wild edibles
- Promote better integration of information on nutritious wild edibles into strategies addressing food security, nutrition, conservation and land-use planning and policy.

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Wild mushrooms can contribute to nutritional security in Western Kenya
Photo: Danny Hunter