

Wild Foods and the Way Forward: Insights from South and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Forests are regarded for their ecosystem benefits and provision of resources, one of which is food. An important yet often overlooked aspect is the role of forests for food, particularly wild food, in ensuring food security and resilience in the face of climate change, challenges to tenure, forest degradation, and deforestation. This is mostly due to lack of access to information on the nutritive values of forest foods and the array of available edible food from the wild.

What are wild foods?

Wild foods are edible non-timber forest products (NTFPs), usually uncultivated plant species, fungi and animals that are not consciously domesticated but collected from forests or its edges and also on traditional gardens and agricultural lands. Some examples are: leaves, seeds, nuts, shoots, stems, root crops, fruit, flower, fish, meat, insects.

Background

From June 2020 to March 2021 the Expert Group on Wild Foods, Biodiversity and Livelihood, led by the Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP) Asia with the support of the Swedish International Agriculture Network (SIANI) conducted a series of dialogues and a culminating multi-stakeholder forum that collected rich insights, lessons and recommendations about the present state of wild foods in Asia and an outlook towards the future. These sessions were participated in by different civil society, grassroots organizations, and academic and research institutions from South and Southeast Asia. Throughout the period, online sessions were held that highlighted wild foods in relation to tenure systems, traditional knowledge and practices, biodiversity and livelihoods.

The discussion series and multi-stakeholder forum is an example of how information and knowledge on forest foods are shared and communicated through a multi-stakeholder platform on a regional scale. It is a way to consolidate lessons and insights grounded on experiences through knowledge exchange, with the aim of deepening the understanding of the value of forests for food and the role of people who manage these resources.

Recommendations towards a more enabling policy and environment for forests for people and inclusive conservation are proposed. The future of wild foods rests on healthy forests which guarantees the well-being of not just forest-dependent communities, but also humanity as a whole. Wild foods conservation, rehabilitation and learning exchanges may offer us a way forward in building a healthy and resilient future with forests.

Scope and Objectives

1. Facilitate sharing of experiences and information on challenges and best practices
2. Increase awareness on wild foods and its links to biodiversity and livelihoods
3. Document outlooks and recommendations from multi-sector and inter-disciplinary perspectives

Innovative approaches

- Virtual space for learning exchanges in a series format
- Cross-collaboration with multi-stakeholder expert group, dialogue partners and advocates
- Applying creativity and digital tools in communications through storytelling, infographics and visual summaries for an information campaign
- Looking at local and global perspectives and analyzing common threads

Highlights from the sessions



- Wild foods are symbolic of traditional and indigenous knowledge, systems, and practices
- Traditional knowledge is learned by observation (*watching*) and actual practice (*doing*)
- Time is a crucial factor in knowledge transfer of wild foods
- "Secured tenure, secured food" – collective management and stewardship in traditional food systems nurtures nature
- As cultures and context change, it is important to restore knowledge back to people and revive interest in traditional food and indigenous food ways
- Opportunities to pass on traditional knowledge on forest landscapes, wild food identification, harvest protocols and processing must be created and strengthened

Conclusions and lessons learned

- Forests are for food and people, not just conservation
- Links between people and forests must be acknowledged and respected
 - Wild foods provide subsistence and livelihoods to forest-dependent communities
 - There is a thin line between exploitation and sustainability – note the importance of engaging the right markets, and observing community resource management protocols
- Current food systems impact biodiversity loss and forests
 - Addressing causes of this loss is crucial
 - Wild foods and indigenous food ways must be included in discussions to develop local strategies that consider strengths and threats faced
- Information on wild foods exist but are vanishing
 - Tenure will bring back the integrity of forests
 - Traditional food ways and knowledge on wild foods are vibrant and have contributed to subsistence, health and livelihoods – including sustainable forest management for food
 - Inter-generational revitalization and strengthening of indigenous knowledge, systems and practices should be prioritized
 - Continue sharing messages of hope and resilience

Way forward and recommendations

- Publicize the links among food, health, forests, livelihoods and biodiversity
- Strengthen inter-generational knowledge transfer and invest in wild foods and forest food education for the youth
- Support conservation initiatives focused on food
- Secure tenure for indigenous peoples and forest-dependent communities
- Practice bottom-up and inclusive policy-making
- Strengthen networks to create alternative discourses and learning exchanges for awareness and visibility on wild foods
- Safeguard indigenous knowledge from biopiracy and exploitation

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References Wild foods, biodiversity and livelihood network SIANI expert group dialogues (2020-2021) and virtual forum (March 8-12, 2021)
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