

SIANI Expert Group Discussion Series

An Introductory Discussion on Wild Foods, Biodiversity and Livelihood

A summary of the proceedings from the 30 June 2020, 3:30pm (Manila time)



Background

The Expert Group Discussion Series on Wild Foods, Biodiversity and Livelihood is part of the activities of the SIANI Expert Group of the same name led by NTFP-EP Asia with support from SIANI. The discussion series will run from June – September 2020.

The Wild Foods, Biodiversity and Livelihood (WFBL) Expert Group works to consolidate the traditional ecological knowledge about wild foods in Asia and links these with relevant policy arenas on food security, poverty reduction and sustainable forest management.

SIANI, or the Swedish International Agriculture Network Initiative, is an open and inclusive network supporting multi-sector dialogue and action around the vision of sustainable agriculture for food security, improving nutrition and the eradication of hunger. They support broad-based working groups called 'expert groups' to convene experts on specific issues in order to contribute to a holistic understanding of emerging issues. Expert groups are able to foster interactions between SIANI members.

The Non-Timber Forest Products – Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP) is a membership association of 21 members including 6 affiliated country programs with a partners network of over 100 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) across Asia, particularly in the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. NTFP-EP aims to strengthen the capacity of forest based and indigenous communities and their support organizations on the sustainable management of natural resources and to protect and cultivate traditional ecological knowledge systems and practices.

On June 30, 2020, an introductory discussion on wild foods, biodiversity and livelihood was held via Zoom at 3:30 – 5:30 pm (Manila time). A total of 56 participants were able to attend and participate in the event.

Presentation Summary

Madhu Ramnath, NTFP-EP India's Country Coordinator, introduced wild foods through a conversational presentation coming out of his own experience and years of study about wild foods. He explored this with other related matters and issues like customary tenure, biodiversity, markets and livelihoods.

In his presentation *“Exploring Wild Food and Related Matters”*, Madhu touched on the definition of wild foods and explored how wild foods are dealt with in today's context.

Wild foods are a symbol of indigenous knowledge encompassing identification, harvest protocols, processing and knowledge of the terrain. It is often passed on by watching and doing and basically living in intimacy with the forest or landscapes in which wild foods are found. Wild foods are plants or animals not consciously planted or domesticated which are consumed as food. Wild, semi-wild and semi-domesticated foods are not easily categorized and a grey area exists. For instance, some countries may consider a particular species as wild food, but this same plant may actually be domesticated in another area.

Wild foods are usually collected in forests in and on the edges of cultivated spaces, wetlands, and even around intensively cultivated rice-fields. These food sources are found in all landscapes, usually non-urban spaces.

Madhu also discussed the negative and macho connotation the word “wild food” may also have in some contexts. ‘Wild’ resonates with non-urban or open, unbuilt spaces. It implies that there is something to be collected, but the collection assumes and implies a range of factors like knowledge on correct identification, proper techniques in harvest, processing and cooking.

He argued that the matter of time should be factored in as well in speaking about wild foods. Many papers written on the subject have left this out, focusing instead on nutritive qualities, positive effects on health, etc. Madhu pointed out that experience in villages show that many available foods are missing from diets because wild foods actually take time and villagers seem to have less time now to dig, make and set traps, walk long distances and spend nights out to gather and process these foods. All of these are part of the cost of wild foods, which are seldom factored in.

He also shared facts and figures on food and wild food, sharing that of the 6,000+ plants cultivated for food, less than 200 contribute to the global food output. Of these 200, just 9 account for 66% of crop production in terms of weight (sugarcane, rice, maize, wheat, cassava, potato, sugar-beet, oil palm fruit, soya bean).

On the average, an indigenous forest village may list up to 300 wild food species in their area. However, of 4,000 recorded wild foods, a 24% decrease in status has been noted.

He shared about problems facing wild food availability and consumption, which include issues and concerns on tenure security and recognition, passing down of traditional knowledge from generation to generation and the challenge of migration and urban influences on the relevance of wild foods, the market in all its avatars can be a double-edged concept (rejuvenation of food vs. exploitation), deforestation, chemical inputs in the land, mining and other large infrastructure projects.

The more biodiverse the area, the more protection for wild foods and their sustainability. Monocultures yield very little wild foods but many lands are being converted to give way to these monocrop plantations.

Madhu also pointed out that there seems to be a relation between the shrinking of world languages and biodiversity.

Amidst these issues he also pointed out areas of opportunity, especially in livelihoods, where we can work on harvest protocols with communities and help link them to the market. Some opportunities related to cultivation can also be explored further in the next discussions.

Finally, he ended his talk with several points for discussion which can be starting points for continuing the dialogue on this important and exciting subject:

- Why do people who collect and use wild foods, not cultivate them? Are some wild foods being cultivated?
- What are the links between wild foods and traditional farming? Is there a clear line of division? Are there similarities? (*a rich area for learning and research on wild foods*)
- Are wild foods better conserved (less threatened) than non-wild foods?
- Can conservation be conceived with a different focus, i.e., food?

- Should wild foods be included in food policies?

After the presentation, the Expert Group members, dialogue partners and participants were invited to pose their questions and join the discussion about the subject.

Discussion Points

Highlights of the discussion are presented below:

- What is slow food?
 - Slow food is a global movement which pays attention to every aspect of food, from where it's harvested. It's not necessarily wild and could be cultivated. Follows the principles of conscious eating. It's in a way the opposite of fast food.
 - It looks at traditional eating habits across the world – how grown, how processed? Maintains both tradition, local knowledge, nutrition. Considered more important than looking at industrialized food production. It is traditionally acknowledged as food linked to communities.
- How to deal with synthetic equivalents that deal with wild food? As a substitute for natural equivalents
 - Chemical taste in synthetic vanilla – a lot cannot differentiate
 - How do we counter it?
 - It is a trend; everything is chemicalized, you find some forms of additives. But people buy it because it is usually cheaper.
 - Unless we have knowledge and ability to spread awareness of the pros and cons, it's something that will continue.
 - The discussion of synthetic equivalents related to biodiversity has been coming up – some proponents argue that it helps in conservation of certain species. It's an issue because perhaps people need more awareness on this.
- In Indonesia, the term wild foods is not often used. They use "local food" instead.
 - One view can be that the foods are so common that they don't even name it as wild foods. Foods that are collected, not cultivated, from the forest.
 - There is also the question on cultivation which is a matter of debate – i.e. if the food is cultivated, do they cease to be wild foods?
 - Different terminologies are used in various countries.
- Are there examples of positive cases or strategies supporting wild food?

- Wild food traditions are still quite alive in many parts of the world, in South and Southeast Asia. It's a major complement to whatever is cultivated is eaten. It is rare that people shift away from staples such as rice, which seems to have displaced the tubers that they used to eat. The variety people eat through the seasons is a lot – maybe 200-300 species of food tasted through the year apart from the staple. An urban dweller, even if they count all the foods in the spices and so on, does not come to beyond 60 species or so. So the tradition of wild foods is quite alive in some places, but serving the purpose of accompanying the staple but are not the staple.
- All food is medicinal in a way. Some are used to enhance appetite, cure anemia, etc. There are overlaps with medicinal plants and wild foods.
- Food is also a status symbol – culturally, some people do not want to be seen eating certain kinds of food. There is this stigma sometimes associated with certain food.
- In discussions on food security advocating for wild foods, what should be the focus? Local consumption or markets?
 - Local consumption first, and excess if sustainably harvested, maybe accommodate markets. It's a dicey one – this issue on commercialization/overexploitation.
 - One of the major ingredients of taste is appetite and hunger. If one doesn't have it, no amount of Ajinomoto (food enhancer) is going to help. There are certain natural food enhancers existing.

Synthesis

Dr. Razal noted that Madhu's presentation touched on many aspects of wild foods not covered in the book *Wild Tastes in Asia*, especially on intangible aspects of wild food consumption. Madhu situated WF as inherent in indigenous cultures, where knowledge on identification of plant and animal foods, and the know-how before they are consumed are passed on from generation to generation both actively and passively.

Madhu also described various concepts and misconceptions on wild food: Where are these foods collected? Who does the collection? Are they amenable to cultivation or not? The element of time also provides an imprint of wild foods, perhaps to highlight how it differs from fast food, farm and agri-based crops.

Towards the end Madhu talked about problems facing wild foods, such as tenure, the lack of permanence in upland living and urban infiltration, market forces and other generic problems that affect the forest as home. As a prelude to forthcoming webinars

on biodiversity and livelihoods, he mentioned threats of monoculture and the lack of adherence to sustainable harvest protocols.

He also enumerated points for discussion. Many in the audience participated and contributed in enriching the discussion further. Many issues were raised during the Q&A – issue on definition, what is wild food? How is it different from local foods? The need for policy and policy frameworks on local food, wild food consumption was also raised. Example, *sagu* – some parts of Indonesia, it is cultivated, in other parts, it comes from the forest. What is the appropriate policy instrument for *sagu*?

On the aspect of variety in food consumption, is it a case of staples vs. wild foods? On the aspect of research, there is a lot of interest in going back to forest foods. More important in addressing production issues are the cultural links to wild foods. All food is medicinal.

The need for messaging. A lot of issues that were raised about the youth not being encouraged or not consuming wild foods is because of the lack of counter-messaging in today's modern world. National companies promote a lot in terms of use of their products vs. products from the forest. Somebody pointed out the need for participation of village elders in encouraging the youth to consume and be proud of wild foods. There is also the issue of law enforcement.

The issue on food safety issues of wild foods and the need for this to be addressed locally rather than on a global scale.

Lots of interesting questions and viewpoints were raised. What this brings us up to is the need for more discussion on the issue/topic of wild foods. Before the discussion took place, a lot of teaser questions were shown on screen – why is the consumption in wild foods declining? Why is the youth disinterested in indigenous food? What are the interests for policy advocacy? What is the value of forest foods to health and livelihood? This is just the initial webinar on this but has provided as with a common ground as far as issues on wild foods are concerned. There are forthcoming webinars to go deeper and explore these issues further.

The participants were invited to the next Discussion Series focusing on ***Customary Tenure Rights and Traditional Food Systems and Knowledge*** will be on **July 28, 3:30pm (Manila Time)**. The invitation and details will be sent out soon.