

Oral presentation

Gaining ground while losing its resources? Traditional Medicine in Northern Peru and Southern Ecuador.

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Introduction. Northern Peru and Southern Ecuador represent the core of the old Central Andean “Health Axis,” stretching from Ecuador to Bolivia. The roots of traditional healing practices in this region go at least as far back as the Moche period (CE 100-800). Although about 50% of the plants in use at the colonial period have disappeared from the popular pharmacopoeia, the plant knowledge of the population is much more extensive than in other parts of the Andean region.

Objectives. The primary focus of this project has been the documentation of traditional medicinal practices and plant use in Northern Peru and Southern Ecuador. This paper presents a comparative analysis of the changes in traditional medicine and plant use in Northern Peru and Southern Ecuador that were triggered by differing colonial and recent administrative policies. A second focus lies on the development of local medicinal plant markets and plant supply in reaction to rising demand.

Methods. Ethnobotanical data were collected from plant sellers in local markets, by accompanying local healers to the markets when they purchased plants for curing sessions and into the field when they were harvesting. Plants were also collected in the field, and - together with the material purchased in the markets - taken to the homes of curanderos to discuss the plants’ healing properties, applications, harvesting methodology, and origins. The data on plant use and healing practices in Northern Peru and Southern Ecuador were compared in order to understand possible differences between these closely related regions.

Results. The healers interviewed in belonged entirely to the Mestizo community. Introduced species, native species similar to species found in Spain, as well as species growing mostly in the coastal regions of the area, are often addressed with names derived from Spanish roots. Plants from the mountain forests and especially the Andean highlands or the Amazon are often known by their Quechua names, and a few plant names can be traced back to Mochica roots. Healers in Northern Peru used more than twice as many plants than healers in Ecuador (510 to 215), and had much less elaborated healing altars. These differences can be attributed to the different legal status of traditional medicine in Ecuador and Peru. Southern Ecuadorian healers have almost abandoned the use of mind altering plants in their rituals, and many plants used for ritual purposes in Peru have disappeared from traditional use in Ecuador.

Conclusion. The number of medicinal plant species used in Northern Peru has remained very constant in comparison to records from colonial times, although the species composition of the local pharmacopoeia has changed considerably. In contrast, centuries of prohibition have led to a pronounced abandonment of traditional knowledge in Southern Ecuador. Peruvian curanderos have started to fill this spiritual void in Southern Ecuador. Healers from the Northern Peruvian mountains and coastal plains frequently cross over to Ecuador to offer their services to patients -- including increasing numbers of foreigners with a “New Age” orientation -- who are not satisfied with the more Westernized approach of Ecuadorian healers. The demand for medicinal plants has increased tremendously over the last decade, and signs of overharvesting of important species are becoming increasingly apparent.

Keywords: Ethnomedicine, Medicinal Plant market, Moche, Andean health axis

Selected References

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