

Oral presentation

Tourism and development in Central America: impacts on ethnobotanical knowledge.

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Introduction. The loss of ethnobotanical knowledge in Central America is occurring at an alarming rate (Ramirez-Sosa 2006). This trend is coupled with the loss of biological diversity in the isthmus as result of development projects that include tourism and the conversion of forests to large housing complexes mainly for foreigners. Panama and El Salvador are two countries where this phenomenon needs to be followed and studied.

Objectives. To determine the impact of tourism and development programs in the region on the conservation of traditional knowledge and to propose possible actions by ethnobotanists that may bring this issue to the attention of decision-making people and community members.

Methods. Field observations were made in Panama and El Salvador to identify areas where forest conversion to residential, industrial, and tourist attractions have taken place during the last decade. In Panama, Isla Colon, Bocas del Toro Province and in El Salvador, Zapotitan Valley, Department of La Libertad was the focus of this analysis. Archival aerial photography available was used to determine the level of deforestation and its impact on local indigenous and rural families.

Results. Isla Colon has considerably changed in the last five years with numerous new large houses built for tourism and for residential purposes. Indigenous families have been displaced and others are at risk of facing the same fate. In El Salvador, new industrial parks in Zapotitan Valley, with some of the richest soils in the region, have replaced highly productive agricultural lands. To accommodate the workforce, large housing complexes have been established in the vicinity.

Conclusion. The destruction of forestlands and the decrease on plant-human interactions contributes to the loss of ethnobotanical knowledge and a consequence is the loss of biocultural diversity. Ethnobiologists can have a positive role in this phenomenon by working closely with indigenous and rural communities in countries like Panama and El Salvador. Access to information in their own language can make a difference not only to local scientists but also to all community members because it allows them to give back to their own communities (McClatchey and Winter 2005). In conclusion, I believe that the threat to biological diversity continues in many parts of the planet and that the loss of ethnobotanical knowledge needs to be in our research agenda.

Keywords: tourism, development, biocultural diversity, Panama, El Salvador

Selected References

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