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Journal of Ethnopharmacology

Volume 137, Issue 1, 1 September 2011, Pages 434-448

Medicinal plant use in Vanuatu: A comparative ethnobotanical study of three islands

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jep.2011.05.050>

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Abstract

Ethnopharmacological relevance

Our study shows that large parts of Vanuatu's medicinal flora remain unexplored and that a high variability of medicinal plant knowledge between islands exists.

Aim of the study

The following questions are comparatively analyzed for three islands of Vanuatu: who are the medicinal plant specialists and how important is their knowledge today? Which plants are used to treat common diseases?

Materials and methods

On Loh, Ambrym and Aneityum plant related information was collected using semi-

structured interviews, transect walks and participant observation. A total of 29 medicinal plant specialists were interviewed.

Results

Medicinal plant specialists are either peasants or people with a high rank in the local social system such as members of the chief's family or priests. Their knowledge may be very broad (Loh, Aneityum) or specialized on specific diseases (Ambrym). Medicinal plant knowledge is transmitted family and gender specific (Loh) or gender and family independent (Ambrym and Aneityum). Overall, 133 medicinal plant species were documented of which 117 are new to Vanuatu's ethnopharmacopoeia. Mainly members of the Euphorbiaceae and Fabaceae, followed by Asteraceae, Convolvulaceae, Moraceae and Zingiberaceae are utilized. The majority of documented species are trees (33%), followed by herbs (22%) and shrubs (21%). Leaves accounted for the highest number of use reports (43%). The highest diversity of medicinal plants is found for the most common diseases such as skin, gastrointestinal, respiratory system and urogenital system diseases. Only a small overlap of taxa between the islands was found.

Conclusions

The biocultural diversity of Vanuatu is reflected in the variability of medicinal plant knowledge and differences in the traditional medicinal system between the three islands investigated. Traditional medicine is more vital on remote islands. The better connected the islands are to the main city, the more dominant western medicine becomes and traditional medicine mainly remains to treat illnesses with a magical origin.

Graphical abstract

Objectives

Investigation of contemporary medicinal plant knowledge focussing on biodiversity, modes of preparation, applications and prevalent diseases in three biologically and culturally different study areas in Vanuatu.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews, transect walks and participant observation.

Results

Totally, 133 medicinal plants collected, 117 new to Vanuatu's ethnopharmacopoeia. Preference of fresh single herb preparations. Typical disease profile of a developing country. Vital plant knowledge, still crucial for solving health problems of local communities. Heterogenous medicinal system in the study areas.

Loh

Ambrym

Aneityum





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Keywords

Vanuatu; Traditional medicine; Ethnobotany; Oceania; Medicinal plant

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