

At the cutting edge of ethnopharmacology

With the rural exodus and globalisation, traditional knowledge is facing the threat of extinction. This fact prompted the WHO to launch a major survey of local pharmacopoeias from 2000 to 2010. This inventory had long been anticipated by IRD.



Pharmacopées traditionnelles en Guyane publication, 2nd edition.



Huaraz medicinal plant market, Peru.

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In 1987, IRD published the first French-language book on ethnobotany. While this field of research has existed for nearly a century in the English-speaking world, it only appeared in France in the 1970s. At the time, anthropologists and a plant chemist joined forces in the field, in French Guiana. In 1974, they began to work together to survey medicinal plants used by the Creole peoples of Cayenne, as well as Palikur and Wayampi indigenous peoples, who lived on the Oyapock river. They analysed the chemical composition of the plants used in their pharmacopoeia,

after which researchers published the results of their research in the form of a book. The objective was to ensure the sustainability of this ancestral knowledge. In the years that followed, researchers drew from the *Herbier de Guyane* and advances in botany to improve the identification of plants forming part of Creole, Palikur and Wayampi pharmacopoeias. A second, updated edition of the book was published in 2004, documenting the use of 620 medicinal species.

In 1992, scientists undertook to collect traditional knowledge among six other Amerindian and Andean ethnic groups. The results were published in agreement with local populations, who were keen to prevent the loss of oral knowledge which forged their identity. These societies were undergoing rapid developments, which were not conducive to the transmission of actions and knowledge to younger generations, in whose education the elders were less and less involved. The survey and publication of this knowledge ensure the maintenance of ancestral knowledge, but also its protection, particularly against patents. In India, a patent on turmeric was cancelled as ancient texts proved prior knowledge of its properties.





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Plants collected for therapeutic steam bath, Peru.

... Review of medicinal knowledge
among nine Amerindian groups
from the Amazon and Andes ...

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