

Wild foods could improve nutrition and food security


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Photo: **FAO**

Needed: Improved access to wild foods such as insects

NAIROBI, 10 April 2013 (IRIN) - Malnutrition could be greatly reduced and food security improved by ensuring improved access to nutrient-rich forest-derived foods like berries, bushmeat, roots, insects and nuts for the world's poorest populations, experts say.

"I believe forest foods are particularly important for reducing malnutrition when it comes to micronutrients such as vitamin A and iron," Bronwen Powell, a nutritionist and researcher at the Centre for International Research on Forests (CIFOR), told IRIN.

Making these foods accessible would mean bringing them to markets to benefit the urban poor, many of whom find imported fruits and processed foods unaffordable, and giving people legal access to forests to obtain bio-resources like game meat and honey in areas where it is illegal to do so.

Nutrient potential

Experts told IRIN that while forest foods are underused, they could prove more affordable and more acceptable than other food options.

"With food becoming scarcer, there are calls for communities to look for alternative food sources

and foods - some of which might not be readily acceptable to them - but wild foods and fruits have been a delicacy for generations and would be readily acceptable to many people," said Enoch Mwani, an agricultural economist at the University of Nairobi.

In its 2011 Forests for Improved Food Security and Nutrition [report](#), the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) noted that households living on the margins of poverty could, during the "lean season" or in times of famine or food shortage, rely on forests to provide "an important safety net."

Others, like Monica Ayieko, a family and consumer economist and an edible insect researcher at Maseno University, say more efforts are needed to change people's perceptions about wild foods.

"The Westernization of diets has made people associate wild foods like edible insects - a vital source of amino acids and minerals - with poverty. It is a pity because so many children die as a result of nutrient deficiency, yet these are abundant in wild foods," Ayieko noted.

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Studies have recently suggested that [insects](#) are a better source of protein as they produce less greenhouse gases than cattle and pigs.

"We must broaden the use of wild foods like wild insects, like crickets, in poor people's diets, and the good news is FAO has begun to take [the] lead on this," she added.

Globally, an estimated 1.6 billion people rely on [forests](#) for their livelihoods, according to FAO.

Some [870 million](#) people globally are food insecure, while a further 2 billion suffer from [nutrient deficiencies](#).

In Tanzania, a 2011 study of 270 children and their mothers, conducted by CIFOR, revealed that children who consumed [wild fruits](#) from forests were more likely to have more diverse and nutritious diets.

The wild foods contributed over 30 percent of the vitamin A and almost 20 percent of the iron that the children consumed each day, even though the foods accounted for just two percent of their diets.

Another [study](#) in Madagascar revealed that 30 percent more children would suffer from anemia if they had no access to bushmeat. And studies in the Congo Basin show that bushmeat accounts for 80 percent of the proteins and fats consumed by the local communities.

Strategies needed

According to FAO , the critical role forests could play in improving [food security](#) and nutrition is usually “poorly reflected in national development and food security strategies. Coupled with poor coordination between sectors, the net result is that forests are mostly left out of policy decisions related to food security and nutrition.”

CIFOR’s Powell noted that “forest foods haven't received much attention” in part due to the current method of “measuring food security in terms of energy [or calories] and not in terms of micronutrients, which has meant that foods that aren't a good source of calories [but have plenty of micronutrients] have been overlooked.”

A lack of national policies to guide the use of wild foods, lack of knowledge about the benefits of such foods, and deforestation and land use changes continue to hamper access to these resources.

Bushmeat consumption is also dogged by concerns over [conservation](#) and possible [health issues](#), which could result in calls for stronger policies to regulate their use.

Increased investment in forest development by governments and organizations, increased local control over forest management and use, pro-poor forestry measures, and the integration of forests into national food security strategies are some of the ways to boost access to forest-derived foods.

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Theme (s): Children, Food Security, Health & Nutrition,

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