

Mirroring the Global Perspective

In the previous edition of the SEB – Caribbean Chapter’s newsletter (2016), Dr. Peter explored and considered what ‘Economic Botany’ meant particularly for the Caribbean and the mandate of the Chapter, being clear that ‘the Caribbean perspective must mirror the global perspective’. In regards to people, plants, traditional knowledge and culture, there are two global initiatives which I feel are very important to the region, and the Chapter can play some role in both.

The first is the WHO Traditional Medicine (TM) strategy 2014-2023. Within the region, work has been ongoing for decades to systematically document the TM practices through TRAMIL (Traditional Medicine in the Islands) and other researchers. Some have suggested that there is a need to formally recognise and integrate TM within the National Healthcare Systems in the Caribbean (Mitchell, 2011). The WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy 2002-2005 had set out 4 objectives which covered policy towards integration where appropriate; promoting safety, efficacy and quality through regulatory and quality assurance standards; improving access and affordability of TM to poor communities; and ensuring rational use by practitioners and consumers. It is clear there is still a lot of work to be done to achieve these objectives in the Caribbean. The new strategy document acknowledges that globally challenges have been faced in achieving the objectives, and is encouraging member states to actively engage in three key areas: establishing the knowledge base through which policies can be developed to recognise the role of TM; strengthening quality assurance standards and procedures, education and training to ensure safe and efficacious use of TM; promoting integration within the national health services by using an evidence base that is appropriate for TM. TRAMIL is a starting point, but further work needs to be done to establish a cohesive evidence base that can support integration, and address the WHO TM objectives – past and present.

The second initiative is Food and Nutrition Security (FNS) for the region. Food security, improved nutrition and sustainable agriculture are highlighted within Goal 2 of the UN’s Universal Sustainable Development Goals (2016). The Caribbean is very reliant on food imports, so the issue of food and nutrition security is currently pertinent. The FAO has worked within the region towards the development of a Regional Food and Nutrition Security Policy (Wilson, 2015), which has been encouraging. Traditional Food plants offer local alternatives to consumers as a valid means of acquiring macro and micronutrients (Grivetti & Ogle, 2000). However, the traditional knowledge and agricultural practices are disappearing in the region. Traditional food crops are valuable economically and nutritionally (Ebert, 2014), and these commodities can contribute significantly to achieving food and nutrition security in the Caribbean. Again, more needs to be done to provide nutrient information, underpinned by the traditional and cultural knowledge which educates consumers, healthcare practitioners and those in the culinary and hospitality sectors. The Caribbean region has a rich biodiversity which is often marketed as part of the tourism offer, and increasingly culinary tourism is becoming part of the package. Outside of the Caribbean region, niche markets are developing around ‘vegan’ and ‘gluten-free’ nutrition alternatives, and the traditional food plants in the region offer options within these niches.

The research emanating from the SEB Caribbean Chapter members can make valuable contributions in both these issues. There is a lot more to be done in the region, and information sharing, documentation, knowledge preservation and cooperation are key ways in which the society can work towards its mandate.

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