

The Amazon Rainforest: More Valuable Alive Than Dead

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The secret to successfully preserving and sustainable harvesting of wild plants from the most fertile soil on the planet is having a vision greater than yourself.

The Amazon rainforest can be considered the mother of botanical resources, with over 200,000 species of plants thriving in the tropical paradise. According to Michael Blalick, director of the Institute of Economic Botany (part of the New York Botanical Garden), "Of more than 265,000 known plant species, less than 3 percent have been tested for their medical applications, yet out of this tiny portion have come 25 percent of all medicines." Many plants, although known and used for centuries in the rainforest, are just beginning to get the attention they deserve, as the world begins to focus on the medicinal plants of the Amazon.

At the same time, a congressional committee report estimates the Amazon is vanishing at a rate in excess of 20,000 square miles a year. One hundred fifty acres are lost every minute, 24 hours a day. With this destruction, we lose the lungs and oxygen essential to planetary balance; we lose species of animal and plant life, and we lose cultures and ancient ways of life.

"Amazon" John Easterling, an explorer and founder of an herbal supply company, has used the potential of ecological commerce and vision to forge partnerships with the indigenous people of the upper Amazon rainforest. Through his efforts, he has created mutually beneficial solutions to current environmental and health challenges.

According to Mr. Easterling, "If you really want to be a part of the solution, the whole idea is to make the rainforest more valuable than dead." One acre of sustainable harvested land yields approximately \$2,400. That same acre, cut down for lumber, will yield only \$400; for raising cattle, it will yield only \$60. Economies of scale are at work. We live in a time in which we can see how ecological preservation, social responsibility and the value of the planet's greatest living pharmacy calibrates at a level of consciousness that benefits us all.

"The Amazon rainforest has the highest concentration of nutrients and life energy on our planet, and new research is finally waking people up to these herbal and nutritional commodities," adds Easterling. "Our response to these herbs may be the greatest hope in saving the rainforest."

Recent studies on *una de gato*, *boldo*, *suma*, *maca* and *quebra pedra* recognize extraordinary benefits for symptoms such as inflammation, malignant tumors, digestive disorders, hormone imbalances, chronic fatigue and kidney stones. *Sangre de drago* reigns among the most legendary botanicals of the Amazon rainforest. Once cut, its dark red sap resin oozes like blood from its bark. *Sangre de drago* has tremendous antioxidant properties. The dried sap contains 90 percent proanthocyanidins, the same phytonutrient found at much lower concentrations in pycnogenol and grape seed extract. Antioxidants fight free radicals, a benefit science believes slows aging and cellular degeneration.

Nicole Maxwell was an ethnobotanist and pioneer who spent half her life examining the plants of the Amazon. One day, while chopping her way through the jungle, she gashed her arm with a machete. The application of *sangre de drago* sap facilitated immediate relief and the growth of healthy skin tissue. Remarkable healing properties have been linked to the presence of the compound taspine in *sangre de drago*, and indigenous people use the sap internally and externally. Taken internally, *sangre de drago* is effective in healing gastric ulcers, and its strong antibacterial components act on *heliobacter pylori*.

The benefits tribal communities in the forest derive from plants and herbs have proven profound. Many communities that reverted in the past to selling land to lumber companies are now kicking those same companies out of the rainforest, canceling contracts and opting to harvest medicinal herbs. Tribes from across the Amazon join in the harvesting.

When Mr. Easterling develops working relationships with a new tribe, he is often invited into counsel with the tribe's chief and elders. In that setting, negotiations lead to agreements on when, how much, how, what, and for what price to harvest the herbs. Ecological ideals create sustainable practices. "We have relationships with the communities based on 20 years of trust and mutual respect," says Mr. Easterling.

The quality of life for the indigenous people of the rainforest has expanded, as they now have more options for their future. The resources provided to them in exchange for harvesting often result in the acquisition of appropriate technology, such as solar-generated power supplies and short-wave radios for intertribal communications and improved relations, along with large land purchases for continued sustainable uses. The tribes also maintain the resources to purchase supplies and food.

"I envision a day when the people of the Amazon rainforest have a say in South American government," notes Mr. Easterling. His dedication and commitment to the rainforest, the people, and global health has become his life's mission. "I am just one link in the chain," he says. "The secret to success is having a vision greater than yourself."

With the ecological and sustainable harvesting of wild plants of the Amazon rainforest, the people living in the jungle preserve their land and culture, and potentially the lives of hundreds of thousands of people suffering with degenerative issues. Mark Plotkin, PhD, an advocate of South American healers, puts it succinctly: "The shamans are not only the crucial link between the tropical rainforest and our neighborhood pharmacy, I believe they are our greatest hope for finding cures to currently incurable diseases, as well as diseases that may appear in the future."

By carefully choosing rainforest products that are sustainably harvested, like wild-crafted herbs, instead of wood products, whose harvesting destroys the forest and all of the life that resides within, we can make a difference - in the future of the rainforest and in the health of ourselves, our patients and our planet. It is truly a win-win situation.

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