The Concepts of Ethnobotany and Ethno-Veterinary Medicine

Ethnobotany

*(Combination of "ethnology" - study of culture, and "botany" - study of plants)*

The scientific study of the relationship between people and plants, that is, how people of a particular culture and region make use of indigenous plants, is termed *ethnobotany* (Mathias, 2004). This term was first coined by the American botanist Dr. John William Harshberger, in 1895, at a lecture in Philadelphia to describe his field of inquiry, which he defined as the study of "plants used by primitive and aboriginal people." In 1896, Harshberger published the term and suggested "ethno-botany" as a field which elucidates the "cultural position of the tribes who used the plants for food, shelter or clothing." As far as the history of ethnobotany is concerned, the earliest recorded uses of plants are found in Babylon around 1770 BC in the *Code of Hammurabi*, and in ancient Egypt approximately 1550 BC. In fact, ancient Egyptians believed medicinal plants to have uses even in the afterlife of their pharaohs. In 77 AD, the Greek surgeon Dioscorides published *De materia medica*, a catalog of about 600 plants in the Mediterranean. It also included information on how the Greeks used the plants, especially for medical purposes (Acharya and Anshu, 2008).

Today, active involvement in the field of ethnobotany requires a variety of skills: botanical training for the identification and preservation of plant specimens; anthropological training to understand the cultural concepts around the perception of plants; and linguistic training, at least enough to transcribe local terms and understand native morphology, syntax, and semantics.

Botanists and/or biologists who may have additional training in areas like archeology, chemistry, ecology, anthropology, linguistics, history, pharmacology, sociology, religion and mythology are called ethno botanists. They gather information about plants from indigenous people and develop classifications of useful and poisonous plants, select and collect plants for cultivation and protection.

Ethnobotanists aim to document, describe and explain complex relationships between cultures and (uses of) plants, focusing primarily on how plants are used, managed and perceived across human societies (e.g., as foods; as medicines; in divination; in cosmetics; in dyeing; as textiles; in construction; as tools; as currency; as clothing; in literature; in rituals; and in social life). Botanists with anthropological and ecological training look at plants as an integral part of human culture.

Ethno-veterinary medicine (EVM)

Ethno-medicine is a sub-field of ethnobotany or medical anthropology that deals with the study of traditional medicines: not only those that have relevant written sources (e.g., traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurveda), but especially those for which knowledge and practices have been orally transmitted over the centuries.

In every culture and society people are dealing with the animals in their own ways, these traditional/local or indigenous knowledge and methods/practices for caring, healing, and managing livestock comes under the umbrella of ethno-veterinary medicine. EVM or ethno-veterinary research was defined by McCorkle as: “The holistic, interdisciplinary study of local knowledge and
Muhammad Asif Raza

its associated skills, practices, beliefs, practitioners, and social structures pertaining to the healthcare and healthful husbandry of food, work, and other income-producing animals, always with an eye to practical development applications within livestock production and livelihood systems, and with the ultimate goal of increasing human well-being via increased benefits from stock raising.” (cited by Martin et al., 2001)

Ethno-veterinary medicines/remedies are practical in use, effective and cheap. They rely on local plants or easily available materials. They reflect centuries of experience of application and learning through trial-and-error (Jabbar et al., 2006). Many non-western traditions of veterinary medicine exist, such as acupuncture and herbal medicine in China, Tibetan veterinary medicine, or Ayurveda in India. These traditions have written records that go back thousands of years; for example Jewish sources in the Old Testament and the Talmud, and the 400 years old Sri Lankan palm leaf records of veterinary treatments (Acharya and Anshu, 2008).

References


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