

EVALUATION OF THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF WILD FOOD BOTANICALS TRADITIONALLY CONSUMED IN NORTHWESTERN TUSCANY, ITALY

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ABSTRACT.—A quantitative method to calculate the cultural significance of wild food plants used in traditional contexts was developed and applied to an ethnobotanical survey carried out in Northwestern Tuscany, Italy. Ninety-five informants were interviewed concerning the cultural significance of gathered wild edibles. Interview data was evaluated through the development of a special index: the Cultural Food Significance Index (CFSI). This index takes into account a wide variety of factors in the evaluation of a specific plant including: quotation frequency, availability, typology of the used parts, frequency of use, kind and number of the food uses, taste appreciation, and perceived role as a food-medicine. Very high CFSI values were identified for several wild “greens,” whereas wild fruits seemed to play a subordinate role. The use of this index allows for the quantitative comparison of ethnobotanical data in an intercultural ethnobiological analysis.

Key words: ethnobotany, anthropology, food plants, Tuscany, Italy.

RESUMEN.—En el contexto de un estudio etnobotánico llevado a cabo en nordeste de La Toscana (Italia), se ha desarrollado y aplicado un método cuantitativo para calcular el significado cultural de las plantas silvestres tradicionalmente utilizadas en alimentación. Noventa y cinco informantes han sido entrevistados en relación al posible significado cultural de las plantas comestibles recolectadas. La evaluación de los datos obtenidos se realizó mediante la aplicación un índice especial: el índice de significado cultural alimentario (CFSI), que toma en consideración una amplia variedad de factores como: frecuencia de citación de la especie, disponibilidad o facilidad para conseguirla, tipología de las partes de la planta utilizadas, frecuencia de uso, tipos de empleo alimentario, apreciación del sabor y, por último, papel que se le asigna como alimento medicinal. Valores elevados de CFSI se obtuvieron para varias “hortalizas” silvestres, mientras que los frutos silvestres parecen jugar un papel subordinado. En definitiva, el uso de este índice permite una comparación cuantitativa de datos etnobotánicos en un análisis etnobiológico intercultural.

RÉSUMÉ.—Une méthode quantitative pour calculer la signification culturelle des plantes sauvages comestibles utilisées dans des contextes traditionnels a été mis au point et appliquée à une étude réalisée dans le nord-ouest de la Toscane en Italie. Quarante-vingt-quinze personnes ont été interrogées sur la signification culturelle que revêt la récolte des végétaux sauvages dans un but alimentaire. Les données recueillies ont été évaluées au moyen d'un index spécial, l'Index de Signification Alimentaire Culturelle (CFSI). Cet index prend en considération un grand nombre de facteurs en vue de l'évaluation d'une plante spécifique: fréquence

avec laquelle elle est mentionnée, disponibilité, typologie des parties utilisées, fréquence des utilisations, types et nombre d'usages alimentaires, appréciation du goût et perception du rôle médicinal en même temps qu'alimentaire. De très hautes valeurs de CFSI ont été mises en évidence pour plusieurs légumes sauvages, tandis que les fruits sauvages semblent jouer un rôle secondaire. L'emploi de cet index permet de faire des comparaisons quantitatives entre les données ethnobotaniques dans le cadre d'une analyse ethnobiologique interculturelle.

INTRODUCTION

Several ethnobotanical surveys in Southern Europe have focused over the last few decades on the use of botanicals in folk medical practices. Nevertheless, in the whole Mediterranean area, only a few field studies have focused exhaustively on gathered wild plant edibles (Corsi and Pagni 1979; Corsi, Gaspari, and Pagni 1981; Guarrera 1994; Paoletti, Dreon, and Lorenzoni 1995; Pieroni 1999; Ertu_, 2000). Furthermore, only two pharmaco-botanical field studies *quantitatively* evaluated the use consensus within a specific area (Friedman et al. 1986; Bruni, Ballero, and Poli 1997).

The evaluation of different botanicals used inside a particular geographical and cultural context is important in order to facilitate an intercultural comparative analysis of quantitative ethnobotanical data. Such an evaluation is also necessary in order to discuss cultural components related to food acceptance and even to find insights for investigating phytochemical constituents that could influence popular appreciation of edibles.

Food botanicals have often been used in traditional systems multi-contextually and are commonly ingested as food-medicines. The physiological aspects of nutrition overlap with the bio-pharmacology of non-nutritional plant metabolites (Etkin and Ross 1982; Etkin 1993, 1994, 1996; Johns and Chapman 1995; Johns 1996; Moerman 1996; Ross, Etkin, and Muazzamu 1996; Chapman, Johns, and Mahunnah 1997; Pieroni 2000).

The aim of this study, focused on food plant edibles, is to develop a method for evaluating the cultural significance of biological taxa, defined as the importance of the role that a plant plays within a particular culture. Theoretically, such evaluation should be done by native people themselves living in that given traditional culture (Turner 1988). The problem concerning the evaluation of the cultural significance of biological taxa has been addressed by a few previous works (Berlin et al. 1973; Lee 1979; Hunn 1982). Berlin in particular used a scale of four values in order to classify the vegetable resources of the Tzeltal-Tzotzil society: "cultivated," "protected," "wild but useful," "culturally insignificant," while Lee later classified !Kung San plants in six classes: "primary," "major," "minor," "supplementary," "rare," and "problematic." These scales represented a first simple attempt to measure the cultural significance of plants. These scales, however, did not consider any special variables involved in the complex issue of the evaluation of cultural meanings of biological resources.

In the present study, we elaborated a specific Cultural Food Significance Index (CFSI) by modifying the methods developed by Turner (1988) for the Thompson and Lillooet Interior Salish people (British Columbia, Canada). Turner's index (In-

