

A SURVEY OF THE MEDICINAL PLANTS OF THE MAYA

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The use of plants for medicinal purposes dates back thousands of years, but we can only make educated guesses as to why or how ancient civilizations such as the Maya originally chose specific plants to treat ailments. In Belize, home to several ruins of ancient Mayan cities and to current descendents of the Maya, this ancient medicinal knowledge is being lost with every passing generation.

The Maya inhabited areas in present day Mexico (the Yucatan, Quintana Roo, Campeche, Chiapas, and Tabasco), Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador (Foster, 2002). Many communities had commodities unique to their location that were of use to others: the highlands had obsidian, used for making weapons; the lowlands had copal, used as incense for various rituals (Foster, 2002). As a result, routes developed between cities to trade both information and goods, including medicinal practices and plants (Foster, 2002). The shared information was recorded so that it could be passed on to future generations.



In 1521, Spaniards spread through Mesoamerica following the Spanish Conquest (Foster, 2002). Unfortunately, the Spaniards believed that Mayan religion and medical practices were inferior to their own. In an attempt to rid the Mayans of their traditional practices, they destroyed records, imposed Western medical practices, and banned traditional Mayan medical practices (Magner, 2005).

Traditional medicinal practices were not completely lost, though. An oral tradition developed to pass knowledge on to younger generations. However, modernization has decreased the younger generation's interest in medicinal plants and traditional medicine.

While I obtained some information about plants and their uses from websites and such books as *Rainforest Remedies: One Hundred Healing Herbs of Belize*, my project's primary goal was to capture Belizean oral knowledge. To accomplish this, I strategically targeted the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area and its neighboring communities.

GROUND WORK

While traveling around Belize to collect samples and information for other group members' projects, we would often come across plants that served some medicinal purpose. Other times we traveled by foot on trails through the rainforest just to look for and study the plants. The following information was recorded for each plant:

- 1) A photograph of the plant was taken for identification purposes.
- 2) Details about the plant's medicinal value was gathered from Ivan Gillett, Programme for Belize, rangers, and local community members. This information included what ailment(s) the plant was used for, what part(s) of the plant were used, and how the plant was prepared and administered.
- 3) Additional relevant information, such as unusual or special plant characteristics and/or additional names for the plant.

I recorded all information in my journal and, upon my return, compiled it to prepare a book/guide. Both a printed and electronic copy will be available so that the next group can continue the project.

REFLECTION

When you seek to make a difference in someone's life, you want that difference to be permanent, not temporary. Returning to Belize for a second time, it was obvious that the work we do across the disciplines empowers our community partners who seem to multiply as our geographical reach extends further and further. As McMaster Scholars, we work to make an impact on people's lives by listening to their needs and working with them to reach a common goal by sharing knowledge, doing research, and capturing a part of their history. My great hope is that people will continue to become interested and engaged in developing partnerships that lead to the empowerment of people around the globe.

REFERENCES

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