Exploration and the Search for Novel Compounds: The Race Against Time

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Introduction:

Indigenous medicinal plants have served and continue to serve a critical role in the development of pharmaceuticals and therapeutic agents. As indigenous groups and their lands diminish, so do the knowledge and wisdom of centuries-old treatments.

The diminished numbers of healers in remote regions and the loss of knowledge of traditional medicine has been observed especially over the past three years (2015 to 2017). The sharp decline emphasizes the need for increased efforts in preservation and sustainability and for an immediacy in increased plant collections for scientific study.

Methods:

11 healers were observed over a seven year period in remote regions of Papua New Guinea and Madagascar. Traditional medicines and methods had never before been shared with the outside world. Healers (all male) had been taught by their fathers, who had been taught by their fathers, and so on. Ages ranged from mid-twenties to early eighties. Written documentation was accompanied by extensive video footage.

Findings:

The loss and destruction of land, tribal fighting, death, and movement towards western ways of life have resulted in depletion of natural resources, disputes over natural resources, loss of information being shared, and devaluation of ancestral ways.

Healers and villages, however, with interest in cultivation and harvesting their natural resources were observed to be more protective of their land while eager for collaborations to utilize the resources.

Conclusions:

Loss of healers, indigenous communities, and natural resources threaten the potential for future therapeutic agents. Enhanced explorations and collaborations with indigenous healers and villages as well as increased study and analysis of specimens are imperative in utilizing the knowledge, wisdom and resources before they are lost forever.