Historical perspective of traditional indigenous medical practices: the current renaissance and conservation of herbal resources

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Abstract

In recent years, increasing numbers of people have been choosing herbal medicines or products to improve their health conditions, either alone or in combination with others. Herbs are staging a comeback and herbal “renaissance” occurs all over the world. According to the World Health Organization, 75% of the world’s populations are using herbs for basic healthcare needs. Since the dawn of mankind, in fact, the use of herbs/plants has offered an effective medicine for the treatment of illnesses. Moreover, many conventional/pharmaceutical drugs are derived directly from both nature and traditional remedies distributed around the world. Up to now, the practice of herbal medicine entails the use of more than 53,000 species, and a number of these are facing the threat of extinction due to overexploitation. This paper aims to provide a review of the history and status quo of Chinese, Indian, and Arabic herbal medicines in terms of their significant contribution to the health promotion in present-day over-populated and aging societies. Attention will be focused on the depletion of plant resources on earth in meeting the increasing demand for herbs.
Traditional knowledge, indigenous knowledge and local knowledge generally refer to knowledge systems embedded in the cultural traditions of regional, indigenous, or local communities. Traditional knowledge includes types of knowledge about traditional technologies of subsistence (e.g., tools and techniques for hunting or agriculture), midwifery, ethnobotany and ecological knowledge, traditional medicine, celestial navigation, ethnoastronomy, climate, and others. These kinds of knowledge, crucial for the construction of Local Health Traditions (henceforth referred to as LHT), which are nothing but the traditional health practices of the local communities making use of locally available herbs, have from time immemorial provided innumerable health care options as preventives and curatives and have thus played an important role in enhancing the health of the local populations. Closely associated with the above two factors is the scarcity of resources in terms of herbs which are widely used in the practice of LHT. The tremendous changes in land use and land cover have led to tremendous loss of herbal wealth.