ETHNOBOTANY OF THE GARIFUNA OF EASTERN NICARAGUA

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Coe, Felix G., and Gregory J. Anderson (Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Box U-43, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269-3043). ETHNOBOTANY OF THE GARIFUNA OF EASTERN NICARAGUA. Economic Botany 50(1):71–107. 1996. We report the diversity of plants used by the Garifuna focusing on medicinals. Garifuna plants documented in this study are distributed among 75 families, 193 genera, and 254 species. Included are 229 medicinals, 93 food plants, and 94 species for other uses. Garifuna medicinals treat more than 30 human ailments and most are native (74%) to eastern Nicaragua. About 70% of the medicinals have some bioactive principle, most are herbs (37%) or trees (34%), and leaves are the most frequently utilized plant part. Most are prepared as decoctions and are administered orally. Most food plants are domesticates, and only 14 of 51 domesticated food species are native to the NW tropics with only three to Mesoamerica. Garifuna culture is changing rapidly as a result of contact with immigrating mestizos from central Nicaragua. This study provides a written record of folk medicine and ethnobotany for the people of eastern Nicaragua.

La etnobotánica de los Garifuna de Nicaragua oriental. Presentamos un informe sobre la diversidad de plantas usadas por los Garifunas con enfoque en aplicaciones medicinales. Las plantas Garifuna documentadas en este estudio (1992–1993) representan 75 familias, 193 géneros y 254 especies. De éstas, 229 son medicinales, 93 comestibles y 94 de usos anciliares. La farmacopea Garifuna se utiliza para tratar más de 30 dolencias humanas. El 74% de las plantas medicinales son nativas de Nicaragua oriental, aproximadamente el 70% tienen algún principio bioactivo, 37% son hierbas o árboles (34%) y la hoja es la parte más utilizada. Los remedios medicinales son preparados preferiblemente en decoción y administrados oralmente. La mayoría de las plantas comestibles son domesticadas y sólo14 de 51 son nativas del neotrópico y sólo tres de Mesoamerica. Los Garifuna están sujetos a una rápida aculturación debido a la migración de mestizos del área central de Nicaragua. Por consiguiente, este estudio documenta la etnomedicina y la etnobotánica para la población del oriente Nicara

Key Words: ethnobotany; medicinal plants; Garifuna; eastern Nicaragua.

The Atlantic Coast is in many respects the most complex and varied region of Nicaragua. It is the home to three extant indigenous groups: the Miskitu, the Sumu, and the Rama. The Garifuna descendants of the Arawaks and Red Carib Islanders (Crawford 1984) also now live in this area (Fig. 1) however, when access roads were opened into once isolated areas of eastern Nicaragua and indigenous peoples’ communal lands were redistributed, there has been a mass migration of outsiders into these areas as well. With this new population has come the destruction of forests for agriculture and cattle ranching, and the displacement of indigenous groups into westernized communities run by logging, mining, and fishing companies. Once in these communities, the indigenous groups rapidly adopt western customs. Missionary groups have also played a major role in the acculturation process by discouraging traditional religious and/or ritual practices within the indigenous population (Smutko 1985). The destruction of tropical rainforests in eastern Nicaragua, as elsewhere in the world, is rampant. Unfortunately ethnobotanical information is being lost at an even faster rate than species and habitat.

There are a number of compilations of ethnobotanical information from Mexico, Panama, or Guatemala. There is relatively little ethnobotanical information from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Honduras. For Nicaragua there has been little ethnobotanical research, and
Fig. 1. Indigenous groups and Garifuna settlements in eastern Nicaragua.