

Rattlesnakes and Food Sovereignty

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It smells as bad as it tastes, something like rotten.

That's what Esther tell us. Esther, who's been diagnosed with uterine cancer, does not have health insurance and cannot afford the recommended surgeries and procedures. She was told by doctors of her illness after going to a local hospital to be treated for abdominal pains around two years ago. Doctors wouldn't treat her because she couldn't pay. That's when Isidoro, her partner, began researching alternative remedies.

One option that stood out - Rattlesnakes.

There's a process of taking a venomous snake and turning it into medicine -which we spell out. The end product is a powder that Esther regularly takes with other foods, and that has a funky, fish-like taste that she is getting accustomed to. The big picture lesson that Esther teaches us is how food can be medicine, with consuming rattlesnakes as one example. More to the point - she is practicing Food Sovereignty in ways as radical and meaningful as any other. In such practices, the struggle is to take power back over our lives and bodies from corporations, using ancestral knowledge to improve our health.

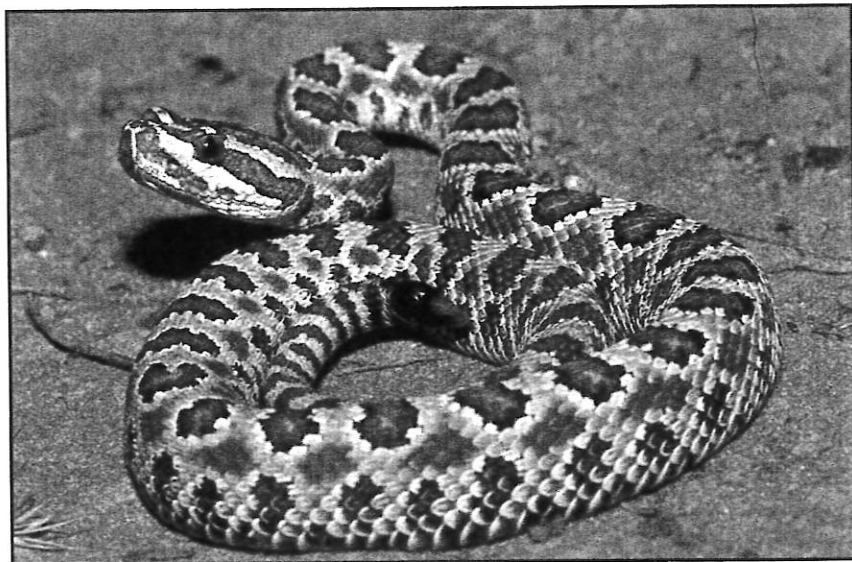
Concerning the details, the idea to consume rattlesnakes in some fashion as medicine is not so far-fetched. It's also not so simple. Search this online, and you'll find all sorts of comments. Some condemn the practice. For example, consuming rattlesnake pills, instead of curing any illness, has been linked to spreading salmonella.

Yet other research generates other results, some of which indicates that there is something beneficial to treating illnesses, such as cancer, with products created from venomous snakes.

For instance, the medication - Captopril - is derived from snake venom and is used to treat high blood pressure. Other research with experimental medication that has been derived from venomous snakes is also underway, showing some encouraging preliminary results with respect to curing certain cancers. Particularly, the Irish company, Celtic Biotech, has developed a drug from rattlesnake venom - CB24 - that has been shown in trials to kill pain and stop tumor growth. Such examples show a real link between products that are derived from venomous snakes and medicine. Still, it really should not have to be this way.

More precisely, there's a problem when accessing potentially lifesaving treatment for illnesses depends on companies extracting from nature certain things we all need. That, after all, is one of the principal elements for the demand for Food Sovereignty - that accessing food should not be in the form of a commodity, but a considered a fundamental human right. Medicine is no different, as our medications, in one form or another, come from the Earth.

We know that venomous snakes, rattlesnakes included, have been used by Indigenous peoples in Americas to treat a variety of illnesses for centuries. *(Continued on pg.17)*



A Rattlesnake - Utah Division of Wildlife Resources

The Study on the History and Uses of Venomous Snakes

In a study on the history and uses of venomous snakes, Ivan Martinez-Vaca Leon of the University of Mexico State, and Xavier Lopez Medellin, of the University of Morelos State, note the centrality of serpents in diets and medicine. Before European colonialism, the Mexican people, for instance, venerated snakes. Besides having a place in ceremony, snakes were also part of treatments for illnesses. To this day, such practices include treatments for asthma, arthritis, and cancer.

Such traditional, ancestral practices, Guide Isidoro in preparing the snakes for Esther.

Isidoro's method is the following: After being killed, the snakes are dried. Like how peppers are dried, the snakes are placed in the sun for days to dehydrate. Then, they are cooked to a crisp in a stove-top pan. The crisp snake is then ground into a powder by a food processor or blender. The powder looks like breadcrumbs. It smells and tastes quite different, however. In powder form, the snake is ready for consumption.

What we see in this process, besides something like a recipe, is a struggle - one involving control over our food and medicine, particularly healthcare. It is not news that the US' Healthcare System is a mess. Our political parties have been fighting over the Affordable Care Act (ACA or Obamacare) for years, as the United States remains one of the few wealthy, industrialized nations without universal coverage. The ACA increased access to healthcare insurance, but still as of 2020, 20.8 million Americans remained without coverage.

Making matters worse, is how insurance companies and pharmaceutical firms dictate drug prices. The Open Markets Institute notes that drug companies, especially since the 1980's, have regularly engaged in predatory pricing while working to stall the introduction of generic drugs on the market. Such anti-competitive practices that keep drugs expensive have been practiced by a dwindling number of pharmaceutical companies, which has dropped from 60 in 1995 to 15 in 2015.

It is here where we see the intersection of the struggle for Food Sovereignty and Health Care, with a few rattlesnakes in the mix. The reason is that the struggle for Food Sovereignty regularly places corporations in its sights - from disputes concerning control over seeds, to efforts to improve farm income and prices, agribusiness giants often are held to account by food and farm activists.

In this way, when we claim food as medicine, we are engaging in this same struggle.

Companies, such as Celtic Biotech, seek to privatize and control what communities have known for centuries on the medicinal effects of venomous snakes.

Esther's struggle, in this regard, is not only for her benefit, but for the betterment of everyone.

It's to take a stand against corporate giants that seek to impose more power over our lives than what they already have, challenging their efforts to continue to control our health care. What's important is that we recognize that the knowledge about our food, farm - and medicinal system - lies in our communities, springing from those of us who put our hands in the soil and who remain connected to the traditions of our ancestors.