

The Good Oil

Jeff McMullen

Uncha, one of many beautiful and intriguing rainforest plants used as medicine by particular Traditional Owners of the Kuuku I'yu people on Cape York, is remarkable by any measure.

Rubbed directly onto the gums, Uncha can ease pain from toothache and infection. It has anti-inflammatory properties similar to hydrocortisone and some over the counter skin care creams. The good oils extracted from the plant also could be used for soothing, natural cosmetics.

After a decade of research and collaboration with scientists from the University of South Australia, David Claudie, Traditional Owner of the Kuuku I'yu Northern Kaanju homelands, told me that such medicinal and aromatic plants known to Aboriginal people for thousands of years hold new promise to sustain traditional life and cultural practice on homelands.

The challenge for Traditional Owners is to hold onto their intellectual property rights.

Recently the Chuulangun Aboriginal Corporation, of which David Claudie is Chair, signed a very different kind of partnership agreement with ITEK, the University of South Australia's wholly Australian-owned commercialization company. Both Claudie and the scientific team believe it is possible to position the Aboriginal people from this homeland at the forefront of the research and development, and as equal partners in the sale of any commercial products derived from this traditional knowledge.

“The signing of the collaboration agreement is very important for the Chuulangun community as it brings together the ancient and the new,” David Claudie said, acknowledging “the ancient Indigenous governance as the foundation for this project and how it will proceed into the future... This is significant for our community past and present.”

Most Aboriginal people would understand how different such an outcome would be to the usual result of so much scientific research on Indigenous peoples and their cultural practices. Aboriginal scholars have written realms on the exploitation of Indigenous knowledge and what can be done to protect it on the people's terms.

Traveling the world and especially in the Amazon and North America I have seen the pattern as one Indigenous plant after another was mass marketed by pharmaceutical corporations with little benefit flowing back to those who shared the plant's secrets. Echinacea, used for centuries by Native Americans, has swept the world without most people realizing where it came from or to whom we owe thanks.

In Australia, tea-tree oil, wattle-seed and many other products are sold by one and all with little appreciation that we are all indebted to the world's oldest continuous intellectual system of knowledge for so many things we take for granted.

To some extent this has been the history of Western medical science. Plants have given us the pain-killers such as morphine that eased my father's suffering on his death bed. Of course all of us want to share the benefits of medicine. Plants produced the anti-malarial agents that reduce the threat to hundreds of millions of people I have witnessed living on delta swamps and infested waterways in places like Bangla Desh. The cardiac medicine, digoxin and even that marvellous, flexible little pill, aspirin, all come to us through nature and good science.

The point Traditional Owners like David Claudie want to stress is that Indigenous societies have the right to direct the development of scientific discoveries that they have always managed under their own form of Intellectual Property Rights and with their own expression of ethical guidelines.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (Article 31) underscores the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to control their medicines. The Convention on Biological Diversity emphasises that Indigenous Intellectual Property Rights extend to this traditional knowledge.

However, the University of South Australia scientists say that in practice only a reworked Native Title Act or much more stringent Intellectual Property laws can safeguard Indigenous Australians against that inevitable global pattern of exploitation.

Nicholas Smith, an ethnobotanist, Susan Semple and Bradley Simpson, both ethnopharmacologists, are unusual in that they are advancing the case for Aboriginal leadership of this plant research and development.

They point out that David Claudie wisely began this relationship by ‘researching’ the researchers. He wanted to make sure that they understood the story that goes with the powers of the Uncha plant. He wanted Western scientists to empty their heads of some of their preconceptions and understand how people living on country are ‘owned by the land’ and develop a very different attitude to plants and animals.

David Claudie learned what he knows about Uncha the traditional way. It came down from his great grandfather, George Morton Senior, a Kuuku I’yu Northern Kaanju leader in the early 1800s. The knowledge and appropriate uses of medicinal plants were passed on to David’s grandfather, George Morton Jr, also a Nyun or healer, and then down through the bloodline.

As David explained it to me, the correct handling of this knowledge ensures that it is not misused, that the plants are harvested at the right time and in the right fashion on the clan estates.

Certainly the collaborating scientists understand that carefully harvesting rain forest plants in the wild and only during certain seasons can produce a very different medicinal effect to chemicals extracted from mass-produced plants grown on farms.

The University of South Australia team also appreciates that Aboriginal custodianship is very different to the open-slaughter of the commercial market place.

Writing in a new book, *Indigenous People’s Innovation*, the scientists worry aloud that some giant pharmaceutical company could still pounce on Cape York’s rain forest bounty.

“Once specimens have been lodged in a herbarium it is currently difficult for Traditional Owners to maintain control over what happens to them...Once the specimens have been sent overseas they become the property of the overseas institution and it has control over them and third parties may be able to access the genetic resources of these samples,” the scientists say.

I wonder how many Australians realise that most of the country’s unique plants can still be sampled in a laboratory and bar-coded to reveal genetic information, provided that the flower specimens themselves are not destroyed?

Clearly the value of these Cape York plants is quite extraordinary.

Cosmetics alone is a \$400 billion dollar a year industry. In the pharmaceutical business some of these rainforest plants from Cape York also have potential as ‘new’ treatments to help relieve the common cold and to treat a variety of infections.

According to the University of South Australia team other plants from the Kuuku I’yu Northern Kaanju homelands are being tested to see if they can tackle bacteria resistant to many over used antibiotics. Certain plant extracts may modulate inflammation associated with “eczema, rheumatoid arthritis, cardiovascular disease, inflammatory bowel disease and some kinds of cancer.”

After going to great lengths to try to protect the Intellectual Property Rights to these plants, David Claudie and his University partners are now looking at the commercial developments.

The most likely first step is setting up a small laboratory and extraction facility on the homelands to sell the essential oils from the Uncha plant. Instead of taking the plants off country, Kuuku I’yu people and university staff would work side by side, using the plants in the rights seasons and carefully sustaining the Uncha for future generations.

Instead of driving people off the homelands towards the unsustainability of overcrowded regional towns it is possible to develop imaginative economies that utilize Aboriginal knowledge of the land, rainforest, rivers and sea.

As David Claudie says, smiling broadly, “that is custodianship.”

(Scientific references in this article are from ‘Ancient But New’ by David Claudie, Susan Semple, Nicholas Smith and Bradley Simpson, in “Indigenous People’s Innovation”, edited by Peter Dravos and Susy Frankel, Published by ANU, August 2012.)