

CHRIS KILHAM

Treasures from the Medicine Trail

AS A MEDICINE hunter, I travel the globe in search of beneficial medicinal plants on behalf of various clients, and I help to establish a trade in those plants, whether they originate in the South Pacific, the Amazon, or Siberia.

My objectives for engaging in this work are three-fold. First, I want to bring more safe, effective natural medicines to people. Plant medicines are the most widely used medicines on Earth because they work well, they are largely safe, and they offer tremendous advantages over pharmatoxins that kill hundreds of thousands of people annually. Secondly, I

work on projects with medicinal plants in a manner that supports a healthy environment. Organic cultivation and sustainable wild-harvesting are means by which this can be accomplished. Thirdly, I work with indigenous native people with ethical wages and benefit sharing. The communities I work with generally make more money than the going mar-

ket rate for their crops, and I coordinate with traders and clients to provide additional benefits to communities, including medical, educational, and communications programs. If an herbal remedy imparts relief from symptoms while the environment is being degraded due to trade in that herb, and while native people are toiling in abject poverty, then there is no holistic healing taking place. Only a system in which all parts flourish is holistic.

A GROUP OF GROWERS IN THE ECUADORIAN MACHE-CHINDUL ECOLOGICAL RESERVE, PROUDLY SHOWING OFF FRESHLY HARVESTED COCOA PODS.





CATS CLAW DRYING IN NATIVE SHIIBO VILLAGE IN THE AMAZON.

Cocoa — In Esmeraldas Province along the northern coast of Ecuador, I recently worked with a group of growers who produce cocoa organically, according to principles of ethical wages. Operating as a cooperative, these growers cultivate cocoa crops in the fertile land of the Mache-Chindul Ecological Reserve. Approximately 350 growers work together, pooling their cocoa to achieve better market prices and higher volume sales. I was there to serve the interests of two companies, French botanical extraction giant Naturex, and Florida-based supplement maker Reserve Life Organics. Both have an interest in cocoa for its well-documented health benefits, and both seek high-quality sources.

Health food devotees used to pander the notion that cocoa and its electuary chocolate are bad for health. But we now know that cocoa is one of the healthiest substances we can put into our bodies, and chocolate is superbly beneficial for health, except for diabetics and those who are obese. Numerous human studies show that high consumption of cocoa and products made from it results in a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, reduced high blood pressure, reduced risk of cancer, and improved mental well-being. My work with cocoa involves establishing reliable trade with cocoa growers,

increasing awareness of the existing scientific information on cocoa through various media and educational venues, and employing stories and photographs of the cocoa growers to give people in other parts of the world a glimpse into



COCOA POD AND BEANS.

where cocoa is produced. If all this goes well, the Ecuadorian cocoa growers in Esmeraldas Province will do well economically, the land they farm will remain under organic cultivation, people will utilize cocoa products to enhance their health, and the general public will be better educated than before.

Despite all the recent media on super berries, cocoa is the ultimate super fruit that radically exceeds those berries in antioxidant protection, cardiovascular benefits, mood enhancement, and overall wellness enhancement. By comparison,

the super berries don't even come close. There is intrigue to this as well, as Mars, Inc. has created a patent firewall around most ways of marketing cocoa products for health benefits. Nonetheless, Mars can't patent everything, and savvy marketers can and will find clever ways to move healthy cocoa into the market, while describing its benefits to a health-conscious public. According to a growing body of published science, cocoa is more beneficial for cardiovascular health than any known drug. For this reason alone, we stand at the threshold of a new era of cocoa-related heart products.

Ayahuasca — Over the past 16 years, I have worked in the Brazilian, Peruvian, and Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest. Every time I board a boat or canoe on either the great Amazon River itself, or on one of its thousands of tributaries, I am thrilled by the experience of traveling those waters. Each time I hike in lush rainforest, I am stunned by the majesty of that place. Sadly, the Amazon is being plundered at a frightening rate, with massive deforestation, mining, petro-exploration, land cleared for cattle grazing, and vast tracts of once-virgin rainforest replaced by GMO soybean fields, so we can put heavily subsidized, nonsustainable ethanol into the gas tanks of our big, fat SUVs.

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CHRIS KILHAM WITH GUAYUSA CUTTINGS.

Working largely on behalf of Naturex, I have spent several years establishing trade in various medicinal plants, including the anti-inflammatory vine cat's claw (*Uncaria tomentosa*), the skin-healing latex dragon's blood (*Croton lechleri*), and a fruit (whose name I'll withhold for now) that makes a beautiful black hair dye. Speaking at various conferences around the world, I have helped to create buzz about these botanicals, for all the right reasons. Major cosmetic companies are especially eager to get their hands on the black hair dye fruit. Who knows — the beauty industry may play a key role in the future protection of rainforest. I have no doubts that many Amazon botanicals will become bestsellers in the health and beauty markets, due to their significant benefits. The tough part is arranging an infrastructure in a land where rivers are the roads, most people lack any form of outside communication, and trade conditions change radically with seasonal rains.

In the course of my work, I have ample opportunity to learn from and participate in ceremonies with shamans. These highly talented medicine men and women bridge the phenomenal and spirit worlds with drums, rattling fans, and the profoundly

potent psychoactive plant brew ayahuasca, which is made from the pounded vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*, and the DMT-rich leaves of *Psychotria viridis*.

In a properly performed ayahuasca ceremony, the psychoactive brew, the shaman(s), and the plant spirits act in concert to speed the participant into a realm in which deep healing and spiritual revelation are easily possible. Many is the person who has sought ayahuasca to treat addictions, or to heal disorders of body, mind, and spirit, with resounding success. Ayahuasca has also inspired a number of medical researchers globally to step up their inquiries into the benefits of this and other psychoactive agents.

The desire to participate in ayahuasca ceremonies has motivated many people from the U.S. and Europe to travel to South America for the experience. Once down there, people witness the savage destruction of the Amazon, and some become motivated to do something about it. Engaging in trade in medicinal plants is an obvious choice, as a replacement for lesser dollars that can be earned from timber, cattle grazing, and other extractive industries. It is too early to tell, but

ayahuasca may hold a key to preserving some of the rapidly vanishing Amazon. Ayahuasca will not soon be sold on the shelves of Whole Foods. Nor will it be made available in easy-to-serve form by infomercial. But in its peculiar catalytic way, ayahuasca may be the attraction that finally accelerates greater interest in the medicinal offerings of the most biodiverse ecosystem on Earth.

Traveling from one country to the next, and exploring various medicinal and beneficial plants, I get a view of the future. I see and work with plants before they become popular, and help to set up the structures by which their trade can be made real. In my work as a medicine hunter, I bridge many worlds, in the hope that people and the planet will benefit. **LJ**

Chris Kilham is a medicine hunter, author and educator. He has conducted medicinal research in over 20 countries. CNN calls Chris "The Indiana Jones of natural medicine." Visit medicinehunter.com



WHEN THE DRAGON'S BLOOD TREE (CROTON LECHLERI) IS STRUCK WITH THE BLADE OF A MACHETE, A RED BLOOD-COLORED LATEX Oozes OUT. THIS BLOOD IS USED TO TREAT EVERY KIND OF SKIN WOUND. DRAGON'S BLOOD IS ESSENTIAL TO THE MEDICINE CHEST OF EVERY AMAZON NATIVE HOME.



Photo courtesy of Zoe Helene