

TREASURE HUNTER FINDS RAINFOREST GOLD

By Dinah Eng

John Easterling has always had a fascination with treasure hunting.

After graduating from the University of North Carolina with a degree in environmental science, he sold his car and bought a ticket to Ecuador to look for lost cities of gold. When he didn't find any, he began to buy local handicraft items and developed a business around selling the native wares.

The promise of gem stones lured him to Brazil, then to Peru, where he started exploring the Amazon Rainforest, trading with the Shipibo Indians and other tribes for their ceramics, monkey bones and artifacts. Then, in 1982, he got sick.

"I had hepatitis and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever before I went to Peru, which left me physically compromised," says Easterling, who caught a low-grade jungle fever. "The indigenous community started making these teas and sharing them with me. I had no expectations, but after three or four days, I felt a lot better. After a few weeks, I felt better than I ever had in my life."

Easterling took some of the Gato vine (*Uncaria Tomentosa*) and Chanca Piedra shrub (*Phyllanthus Niruri*) with him, making teas for himself over the next couple of years. He became convinced that the medicinal healing properties of plants were the real treasure of the Rainforest, and started the Amazon Herb Company.

"The Indians starting telling me fascinating stories about healing," Easterling says. "No one from the outside had been interested in this before. There were plants in different areas used for different illnesses. I began working with different practitioners to formulate our products."

Established in 1990, the company developed nutritional supplements and skin care products, and works to preserve the Rainforest. Easterling envisions using eco-commerce for Rainforest sustainability, promoting health, and of course, making money for himself.

While the efficacy of his products may be different for each person, Easterling's belief in the power of the Rainforest botanicals makes sense to me.

"Everything has an energy and vibration," Easterling says. "The resonance and frequency of what we put in our bodies is so important. A plant in the middle of Iowa sees only plants like itself and is sprayed with chemicals and toxins. When you eat that corn, you're taking in the stress of the life of that corn plant.

"The information ingrained in the Rainforest plants is about survival of the fittest, and living in a place of balance and harmony. I find that when I eat things from the Rainforest, I don't need to eat as much. The plants there are sending messages to us about healing."

While there is no U.S. Food and Drug Administration oversight of Rainforest products, the ingredients cited in products like Zamu -- a nutritional drink that touts Camu Camu, a Rainforest fruit with high concentrations of Vitamin C -- sound like they'd certainly offer health benefits to anyone.

It's good that we're paying more attention to what we put in our bodies. For example, the popularity of acai berries -- touted for their weight loss benefits -- is understandable because there's no doubt that berries and other fruits are a key part of any healthy diet promoting weight loss. Whether there's anything special about acai's ability to help you lose those pounds, though, is unproven.

As more research is done on the medicinal properties of Rainforest plants, I have no doubt that new drugs will emerge for many diseases. What's important is recognizing that whatever we eat is only a part of how we treat our bodies every day. The mind, body and spirit are connected, and we must take care of the wholeness of who we are.

For Easterling, the hunt for cities of gold may have ended, but he looks forward to the discoveries ahead in the Rainforest.

"The Amazon Rainforest produces 30 percent of the world's oxygen, and is our planet's greatest climate stabilizer," he says. "Seventy percent of the world's plants showing anti-cancer activity came from the Rainforest. From a global perspective, the real treasure is the Rainforest itself."

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