

Flora grown and traded in Panama City, in the 16th century and nowadays

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Introduction

The Panama City area was colonised from the year 1514 onwards, when famous Spanish explorer Vasco Nuñez de Balboa discovered the so-called “Southern Sea” for posterity. It is a tropical environment that registers about 1,750 millimeters of rain per year.



Objective

The main objective of the research is to assess the availability of local food, spices and medicines in the early years of European colonisation and to evaluate the contribution of the Portuguese and the Spanish peoples to the evolution of flora consumption and therapeutic applications.

Material and Methods

The research process was twofold: 1) Enumeration of the local flora as mentioned in the 1526 manuscript of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, with the proposition of a scientific identification for them, as well as their uses in early colonisation times;

2) Design of a 2017 University of Lisbon survey to flora consumption and trade, including two categories of informants: i) three gardeners (3) devoted to food and medicines cultivation inside the urban tissue; ii) forty-seven (47) market, supermarket, pharmacy and natural product formal and informal traders.

Results and Discussion

Results show that 166 plants, corresponding to one-hundred seventy and one (171) different species are offered to the public in 2017, against fifty-five plants (55) mentioned by the chronicles in early colonisation days. More than half of the species have medicinal uses in our time and about a third are consumed as food.



Conclusions and Outlook

The most consumed fruit is the coconut, both as food and applied in hair and body care, as the tree was already present in the Pacific shores in Oviedo's time. A total of twenty-nine species mentioned by Oviedo are still commonly used as medicine or consumed as food or spice, in our days.