Learn two important lessons from the goat and the deer– diversify food options!

ECHO Inc.

Lesson I. Browsers can pay less attention to exact nutritional analysis of each component of their diet.

Goats and deer are browsers. This means that they eat a modest amount of one kind of plant, then go looking for something else to eat. In contrast, grazers (such as cattle and sheep) find something they enjoy and contentedly eat more and more and more of that one thing.

The diet of the browser contains a sampling of all the edible plants they enjoy. By the end of the day they have likely eaten a modest amount of every vitamin, mineral, oil, carbohydrate or essential amino acid that they need for good health. The grazer has eaten only what was in the one or two kinds of plant they ate that day.

People will be rewarded by intentionally being browsers. By eating a wide variety of foods, we will be more likely to take in a sufficient daily amount of all that we need for good health. In contrast, cultures that, for example, eat mainly rice or tortillas or bread made from one kind of grain (and perhaps some legumes, if they can afford them) are much more likely to experience deficiencies in one or more nutrients. Cultures that enjoy a wide variety of vegetables, including cooked leaves, are blessed for that reason.

A common question when I give tours of the plantings at ECHO is, "What is the nutrient content of that plant?" That is interesting information to know, though in many cases the plant has never been completely analyzed. But I think we tend to make nutrition more complex than it needs to be. An otherwise healthy person with a diverse diet probably has no nutrient deficiency. (An exception would be if plants cannot take up an essential mineral because that mineral is not present in the soil. A good example is goiter caused by iodine deficiency in locations where there is little or no iodine in the soil. In such cases the mineral must be brought in from outside the community.)

It becomes important to know more precise figures about nutrient content when we need to treat a specific deficiency. For example, if illnesses are showing up because of a certain vitamin deficiency (perhaps because there is little diversity in the diet or disease prevents adequate uptake), then it would be helpful to identify edible plants high in that nutrient that are acceptable to individuals who lack it.

This is why one of ECHO's core ministries is to make people aware of the incredible diversity of food plants that have been placed here by our Creator, and to make trial seed packets available to increase the local diversity of food options. Ninety-five percent of the food eaten by man comes from only 30 species of plants. Only one of those, the 29th most important, comes from the continental United States where I live! That plant is the sunflower. Almost everything I eat originated in another part of the earth. (You may ask, "What about corn/maize?" Maize was introduced from Mexico and Central America to what is now the United States by American Indians.)

Lesson II. Browsers are less likely to react to toxic substances.

Animal nutritionist Dr. Peter VanSoest, my advisor when doing post-doctoral research one summer at Cornell University, taught me the second lesson from the goat and the deer. He pointed out that the liver is capable of detoxifying modest amounts of almost anything. But its capacity to detoxify a particular toxin can easily be exceeded. Then health problems arise.

A decreased ability to handle a particular toxin can result when people adopt a "fad diet" and eat something in extreme. A good example of that was mentioned in EDN 90. People in Taiwan went on a diet plan in which a main food was raw juice extracted from leaves of a popular vegetable in SE Asia (and at ECHO) called katuk, Sauropus androgynous. Thousands of people have eaten this popular vegetable for centuries with no report of harm. But many people on this diet in Taiwan (EDN 59) ate far, far more than their liver could detoxify and they ended up with serious, incurable lung disease.

Conclusion

PLWHA face a number of unique challenges. An awareness of some of the issues can be helpful when planning ways to help. We would welcome feedback regarding issues that we have mentioned, as well as ideas and insights not mentioned here.

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