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Food or Pests?



User conflicts over leaf-cutter ants (*Atta laevigata*) in Colombia

Des fourmis utiles ou nuisibles ? Conflits d'usages autour d'*Atta laevigata* en Colombie

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Introduction

The reproductive winged females of the leaf-cutting ants *Atta laevigata*, called *hormigas culonas* ("ants with a big bottom"), have been consumed in the Department of Santander in Colombia since Prehispanic times. The demand for this insect, seen as a gourmet food, has been increasing over the last years in the whole country. In the meantime, agriculture has intensified in this region. For the farmers, the leaf-cutter ant is considered as a pest as it harms cassava plants and fruit trees.

They fight against it by poisoning the nests. *Atta laevigata* is at a center of a user conflict: agricultural production on one side and ant harvesting, trade and consumption on the other side. Therefore, how to combine economic, ecological and social interests?



Methods

This research is the result of a preliminary fieldwork led in October-November 2018 in Bogotá and in the Department of Santander in Colombia. Both authors conducted semi-structured interviews with traders, collectors and consumers of edible ants in Bucaramanga (Department capital) and three small towns (San Gil, Socorro, Barichara) about their knowledge and practices.



Results

The native range of *Atta laevigata* is a savanna corridor between two mountain chains of the Andes in the Department of Santander, as well as the savannas of the Llanos Orientales, in the East of the country (extending to Venezuela). This species, consumed all over these areas, is renowned as a food specialty from Santander.

Santandereanos who have migrated to other regions are nostalgic of the edible ants, thus ant trade, formerly restricted to local towns, expanded in the whole country. Ants became a gourmet food, sold in delicatessen shops and tourism spots in Santander and in the main Colombian cities. More recently it has been served in elegant restaurants and exported abroad. Consequently the price increased tremendously. Since the 1970's, large extensive cattle-ranching estates in Santander have been divided, and agriculture, now turned towards coffee and citrus fruits production, has intensified. For farmers, ants are a pest. According to ant traders, while the demand and the price have been increasing, the resource has been decreasing.



Discussion

The inhabitants of the studied region did not use to perceive ants as pests, as agriculture was not intensive, but now cultivators try to eradicate them with chemical poisons they directly apply to the nests. Some farmers are not interested in ants, while many others consume and sell them to traders.

Actually ants and crops are not harvested at the same time, thus complementing each other. The increasing demand on ants may have had an impact on the resource, but nest poisoning is more likely to be the main driver of the decline. Ant collectors observe that ant nests are now less numerous in areas dedicated to agriculture, rather occupying periphery areas, on slopes and meadows, and that, each year, a smaller quantity of ants comes out for the mating flight. Possibly large old nests were eradicated, so present-day younger nests are smaller.

Conclusion

By poisoning ant nests, farmers deprive ant collectors, and sometimes themselves, of a nutritive food and a potential income. While agricultural incomes are distributed all around the year, this income is only available during a short period, so it does not present a sufficient incentive to stop poisoning the ants. More integrative methods combining collectors and farmers' interests should be found.

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