

TRAVEL

Slow and wild wins the race



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Eat locally grown food and you could be saving the environment, was the message at the recent Wild and Slow Food Festival at Kotagiri, writes ROHAN PREMKUMAR

More than 50 different dishes, prepared from produce procured from the forests by indigenous communities, were served up to crowds anxious to get a taste of some exotic flavours at the wild and slow foods festival, organised by the Keystone Foundation at their campus in Kotagiri recently.

The waiting crowds interacted with members of different, indigenous tribes, including the Irulas, Kurumbas, the Todas and Kotas in their traditional attire who described the peculiarities of each of their dishes to curious visitors.

Pratim Roy, Founder Director of Keystone Foundation, explained the concept of wild foods.

He stated that it is based on the basic understanding that local cuisines are intrinsically linked to the culture of indigenous communities, and is an attempt to revive traditional local consumption patterns among both indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

“Slow Food is food grown locally, and which gains a fair price for the producer and does not have a huge negative footprint on the environment. Food is linked to culture and ecology, is a part of the different seasons and sacred practices of the respective communities where it is grown. So it plays a vital role in local diets, nutrition and even on conservation of biodiversity,” Roy said.



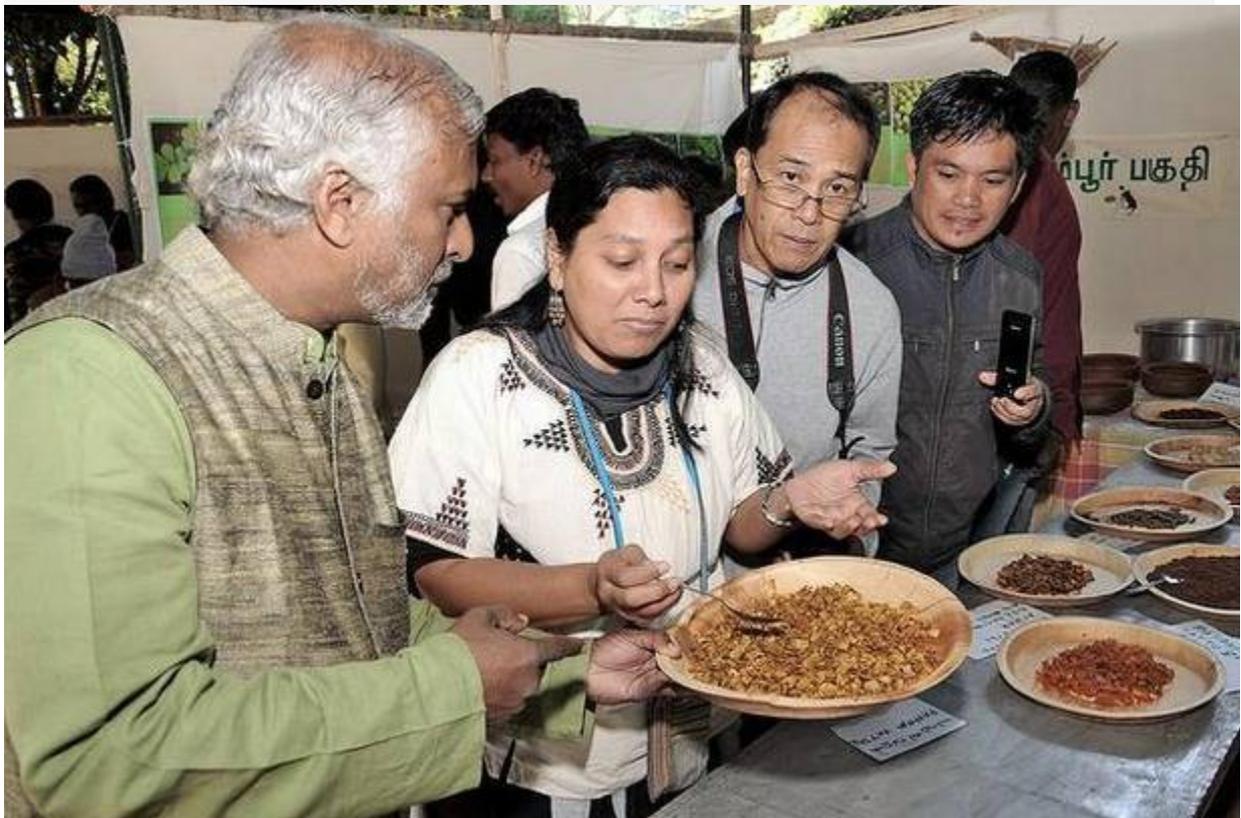
'Eat local' was the message at the Tribal Food Festival organised by the Keystone Foundation in Kotagiri. | Photo Credit: [M_Sathyamoorthy](#); [M_Sathyamoorthy](#) -

Madhu Ramnath, Co-ordinator for India of the Non-timber Forest Products – Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP), who was at the festival with delegates of the NTFP-EP from six other countries from Southeast Asia for an international meeting on wild foods, said that tubers form a major part of the diet of indigenous communities in India.

“There are around 20-25 different tubers which form the staple of many tribal communities. These tubers grow in the forests and are also grown on an agricultural scale. They have unique nutrient qualities,” he said.

He added that there was an existential threat to wild foods, especially with rampant mining and large government and commercial projects that were displacing tribal communities in many parts of India.

“This is a great effort to rejuvenate the interest in wild foods, which will benefit the general population by allowing them to share in the nutritional benefits of the food, and also empower tribal communities by giving them a sustainable source of income,” said Ramnath. He also said that there were harvest protocols and regulations in place to ensure that the cultivation and harvest of wild foods did not have a detrimental impact on the remaining patches of forests. “Moreover, we are not trying to commercialize the wild foods concept,” he stated.



Tribes from Tamil Nadu Kerala and Karnataka as well as visitors from other Asian countries took part in the Tribal Food Festival at Kotagiri. Founder Director of Keystone Foundation, Pratim Roy, that organised the event explains the local produce to guests. | Photo Credit: [M_Sathyamoorthy](#); [M_Sathyamoorthy](#) -

Femy Pinto, from the Philippines felt the festival would enable “knowledge transfer, exchange of practices and address issues arising out of consumption.” Wild and slow food concepts can help battle food insecurity and the battle against climate change.

Similarly, Diep Dinh Phong, speaking about Borneo in Indonesia, said that similar environmental issues plaguing India are the norm in most Asian countries. “In West Kalimantan district in Borneo, palm oil plantations are leading to tremendous amounts of rainforest depletion, and in the process are wiping out Orangutans. There are also huge rubber and tea plantations, and the wild foods movement could be a step in combating such large-scale destruction by encouraging tribal communities to regain control of their traditional lands.”

K Madhavi, a resident of Achikarai in Masinagudi, and a member of the Irular tribe, said that consumption of forest produce has reduced greatly in the last few decades. “As we are often not allowed into the forests to gather produce, we have come to depend more and more on rations from the PDS,” she said.

K Mani and C Jayam, from the Masinam Kulu in Adivasi Colony in Masinagudi, pointed out that “pressure keerai, kova keerai and sakkaadu keerai,” are used by tribal communities to treat high blood pressure, gastrointestinal problems and even joint pains.

A variety of different crops, including legumes, yams, tubers, fruits and varieties of greens and spinaches, all having a unique link to the place where they grew were showcased at the stalls. “We still have the know-how to find these plants, which both serve as food and medicinal supplements, in the wild,” said Mr. Mani.

S. Krishna, a visitor who happened to stumble upon the festival, said that such festivals enlightened people about the “huge-web” that connected all life, and how local consumption patterns can have a huge influence on communities hundreds,

even thousand of miles away. “The key message we should take home from such a gathering is to buy local and buy vegetables and fruits that do not take up a lot of resources in terms of water and soil nutrients,” he said.

“More and more, people are learning that to buy locally is to support local populations and support ecology. There is a great undercurrent of change that is developing, and we can use the knowledge of indigenous communities to affect the necessary change,” said Pratim Roy.