

Cultivating Social-Ecological Resilience, Harvesting Biocultural Resistance in Southern Andes

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Abstract : The fertile interdependence of social-ecological systems reveals itself in the interactions between native forests and seeds, home gardens, kitchens, foraging activities, local knowledge, and food practices, creating particular flavors and food meanings as part of cultural identities within territories. Resilience in local-food systems, from a relational perspective, can be understood as the balance between persistence and adaptability to change. Food growing, preparation, and consumption are constantly changing and adapting as expressions of agency of female and male indigenous peoples and peasants. This paper explores local food systems' expressions of resilience in the la Araucanía region of Chile, namely: diversity, redundancy, buffer capacity, modularity, self-organization, governance, learning, equity, and decision-making. Applying ethnographic research methods (participant observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews), this work reflects on the experience developed through work with Mapuche women cultivating home gardens in the region since 2012; it looks to material and symbolic elements of resilience in the local indigenous food systems. Local food systems show indeed indicators of social-ecological resilience. The biocultural memory is expressed in affection to particular flavors and recipes, the cultural importance of seeds and reciprocity networks, as well as an accurate knowledge about the indicators of the seasons and weather, which have allowed local food systems to thrive with a strong cultural foundation. Furthermore, these elements turn into biocultural resistance in the face of the current institutional pressures for rural specialization, processes of cultural assimilation such as agroecosystems and diet homogenization, as well as structural threats towards the diversity and freedom of native seeds. Thus, the resilience-resistance dynamic shown by the social-ecological systems of the southern Andes is daily expressed in the local food systems and flavors and is key for diverse and culturally sound social-ecological health.

Keywords : biocultural heritage, indigenous food systems, social-ecological resilience, southern Andes

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