



DOCUMENTATION REPORT

Elevating Champions for Wild Foods and Traditional Crops

**Zoom Webinar
30 March 2026
16:30 - 19:00 Philippine Standard Time**

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Background

The webinar, "Voices of Asia: Elevating Champions for Wild Foods and Traditional Crops," was held on March 30, 2026, from 4:30 to 7:00 PM (PHT). Organized by the Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP) Asia in collaboration and with the support of Swedish International Agricultural Network Initiative (SIANI) and the Indigenous-Led Education (ILED) Network. This virtual event featured simultaneous Hindi interpretation to ensure regional inclusivity.

The webinar served as a strategic platform to harmonize the overlapping objectives of the SIANI Wild Foods in Asia Expert Group and the ILED Network. Its primary goals included:

- **Knowledge Exchange.** Sharing ILED initiatives focused on wild foods and traditional crops.
- **Advocacy & Visibility.** Raising awareness of food security, sovereignty, and cultural resilience.
- **Network Building.** Cultivating a resilient regional network of "champions" dedicated to nurturing and protecting indigenous food systems for the next generations.

The 2.5-hour program featured four presentations given by experts from India, the Philippines, Myanmar, and Indonesia. Through cross-regional dialogue, speakers explored practical, technical, and pedagogical methods for protecting wild species and traditional knowledge.

A central theme was the role of education, both formal and informal, and holding events like cultural festivals in facilitating intergenerational knowledge transfer. The session utilized an interactive format, including:

1. **Expert Presentations.** Empirical and technical insights followed by moderated Q&A.
2. **Dynamic Engagement.** Mentimeter quizzes, knowledge sprint breakout room sessions, and brief plenary reflections.

The event drew significant international interest, with over 90 registered people and a peak live attendance of about 50 participants. This diverse cohort represented a broad geographic spectrum, with attendees joining from across Europe and Asia to engage in the cross-regional dialogue.

This documentation captures how the integration of action research and community-led education fosters long-term food sovereignty. By securing dedicated spaces for traditional crops, these initiatives build a sustainable buffer against environmental shocks, safeguarding ecological and cultural diversity for future generations.

Moderators: Femy Pinto, NTFP-EP Asia and Wild Foods Asia Expert Group and Tanya Conlu, ILED Southeast Asia Coordinator

Distinguished Speakers:

- **Madhu Ramnath (India)**
 - *Coordinator, NTFP-EP India and Lead, Wild Foods Expert Group*
 - A veteran practitioner of Indigenous botany and linguistics with nearly four decades of experience living alongside various communities. Based in Tamil Nadu, he integrates research with practice, maintaining a backyard forest garden dedicated to agrobiodiversity and the cultivation of *Dioscorea* (yams).
- **Arjun Singh Nag (India)**
 - *Founding member, Legal Environmental Action Foundation (LEAF)*
 - An Indigenous lawyer from Bastar, Chhattisgarh. His work focuses on leveraging formal and customary legal frameworks to safeguard ancestral lands and the traditional practices essential to Indigenous food systems.
- **Nemia F. Gareza (Philippines)**
 - *Principal, Sentrong Paaralan ng mga Agta (SPA)*
 - She is an educator and Indigenous rights advocate with over 30 years of experience. She leads the SPA in the Sierra Madre Mountains, an institution founded in 1987 to provide culturally-rooted education specifically designed for the Agta (Dumagat) communities.
- **Saw Moo She (Myanmar)**
 - *Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)*
 - He is an ethnic Karen from Burma. He manages biodiversity and food systems under the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN). His work highlights the resilience of Karen Indigenous knowledge in maintaining food sovereignty despite regional political instability.
- **Veronika Heni (Indonesia)**
 - *Riak Bumi Foundation*
 - She represented a grassroots organization based in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. She detailed the foundation's work with communities in Kapuas Hulu, specifically focusing on cultural revival through the celebration of traditional food systems. She shared community-based natural resource management to bridge the gap between ecosystem conservation and sustainable livelihoods.

Executive Synthesis and Roadmap

The challenge

Indigenous and local communities across Asia are currently grappling with a significant decline in the preservation and use of wild foods and traditional crops. Essential staples such as yams, tubers, and millets are frequently sidelined by broader, commercialized food systems, leading to a rapid erosion of biodiversity. This trend is driven by a lack of public awareness and the accelerating loss of ancestral knowledge, leaving these populations increasingly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and sudden food shortages. By losing the very resources that have historically provided regional resilience, these communities face a precarious future regarding both food security and cultural identity.

Bridging wild foods and Indigenous-led education

To combat these challenges, the Wild Foods in Asia Expert Group launched a year-long initiative in 2025 across India, Vietnam, and the Philippines. As the funding This webinar served as the final activity of this project supported by the SIANI, acting as a strategic bridge between the Expert Group and the ILED Network.

By bringing these two networks into a harmonious discourse, the webinar encouraged long-term collaborations between conservationists and educators and includes the leaders, elders, educators, women, and youth. This event focused on the conservation of traditional resources and those specialized in educational and cultural strategies.

Through the collective sharing of the four country presentations, supplemented with additional information from regional participants, this virtual event synthesized overarching themes into actionable lessons learned, systemic challenges and risks, and strategic recommendations.

Lessons learned

1. Protecting Indigenous wild food knowledge systems is essential to saving languages, activities, skills, and cultural stories that describe them.
2. Promoting Indigenous educational framework and materials help bridge the gap to preserve wild food species and cultural heritage.
3. Understanding Indigenous skills and community knowledge on managing forest resources is important.
4. Promoting local ingredients is a vital strategy for preserving traditional knowledge and countering modern dietary trends.
5. Women serve as the primary experts and leaders in managing the forest for both food and medicine of the community.

Systemic challenges and risks

1. Impending knowledge loss of Indigenous wild food knowledge rooted in insufficient intergenerational transfer.
2. Significant gaps in recruiting and training educators that hinder the integration of Indigenous-focused pedagogy.
3. Regulatory frameworks and protected area restrictions that physically and legally restrict Indigenous access to ancestral lands and resources.
4. Shifting culinary preference of youth creating a “taste divide” driven by modern food trends.
5. Labor-intensive nature of traditional harvesting, which creates a conflict between cultural preservation and the demands of modern education and employment

Strategic recommendations

1. Revitalize Indigenous food systems among youth by making traditional flavors and sustainable food practices relatable to contemporary lifestyles.
2. Accelerate intergenerational knowledge transfer within a decade to prevent the permanent erosion of Indigenous wisdom.
3. Integrate traditional ecological knowledge into school curricula and provide culturally-grounded digital and external influences.
4. Launch community-led initiatives that incorporates storytelling, traditional games, and culinary showcases to present terminologies, cultural significance, and nutritional value of forest foods.
5. Drive inspired research and documentation initiatives, specifically involving Indigenous women and youth, regarding wild foods and traditional crops.

Welcome and Introduction from SIANA EG Wild Foods in Asia

Femy Pinto, NTFP-EP Asia and SIANI Wild Foods Asia Expert Group

Femy Pinto, Executive Director of the Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP) Asia, opened the webinar by representing both the regional network and the SIANI Wild Foods Asia Expert Group. Addressing an international audience spanning from Europe to Asia, Pinto introduced NTFP-EP Asia as a dedicated network composed of 31 members and supported by over 125 partner NGOs and community-based organizations.

The network specializes in capacity strengthening for sustainable natural resource management across a broad geographic footprint, including Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, with additional partnerships extending to Myanmar and Mongolia.

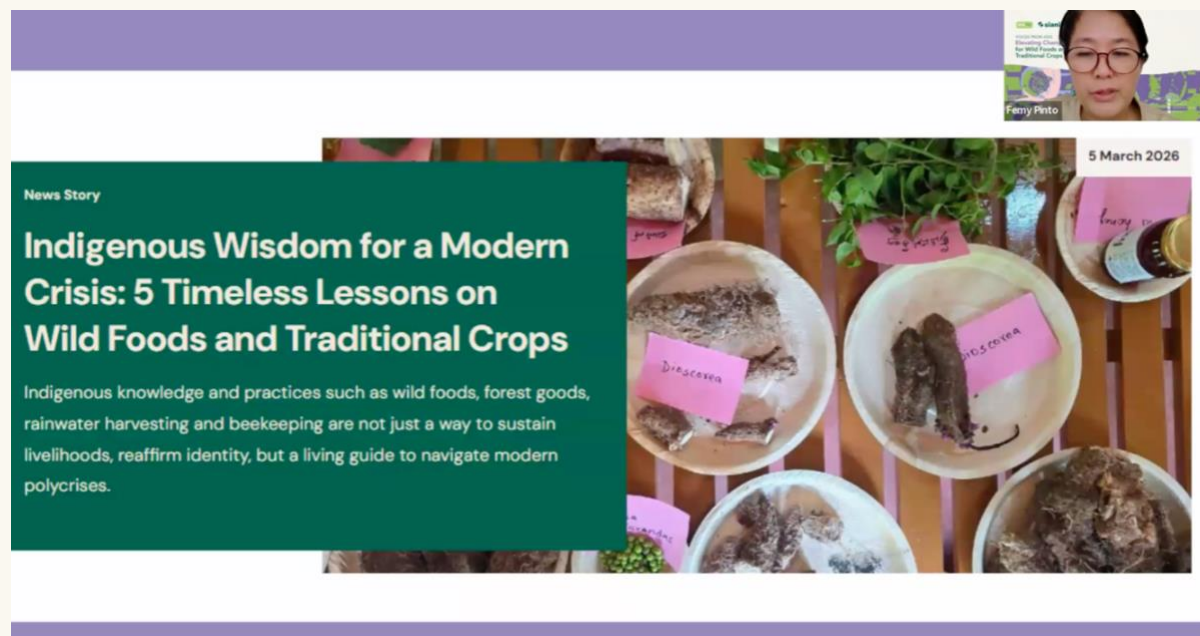


Figure 1. Welcome and Introduction SIANI EG on Wild Foods in Asia by Ms. Femy Pinto

As the primary convener of the Wild Foods in Asia Expert Group, NTFP-EP Asia has spearheaded two transformative phases of SIANI-supported research:

- Phase I (2020–2022): This period was characterized by digital resilience with heavy reliance on online dialogues to maintain exchanges during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Phase II (2025–March 2026): This marked a return to the landscape bringing researchers and practitioners back into direct field engagement. These efforts culminated in the physical establishment of wild food gardens in the Philippines and India, alongside intensive community-based documentation in Vietnam. They were able to document over 100 diverse species of important wild food species and local variety of traditional crops. For *Dioscorea* (yams), over 40 species have been identified.

This ground-level shift was designed to transition indigenous traditions into the broader public consciousness. By spotlighting essential staples, specifically yams, tubers, and millets, the Expert Group demonstrated that these crops are not merely marginal foods but the bedrock of rural livelihoods and a critical shield for community resilience against escalating climate shocks and food shortages.

Presentations and Knowledge Exchange

Before the presentations, the session transitioned into an interactive icebreaker facilitated through Mentimeter. Online participants were asked to share their insights on a central question: **“What can be done to ensure that wild foods and traditional crops are recognized, protected, and nurtured?”** This exercise was designed to capture the collective wisdom of the attendees and identify the most critical levers for the long-term survival of indigenous food systems.

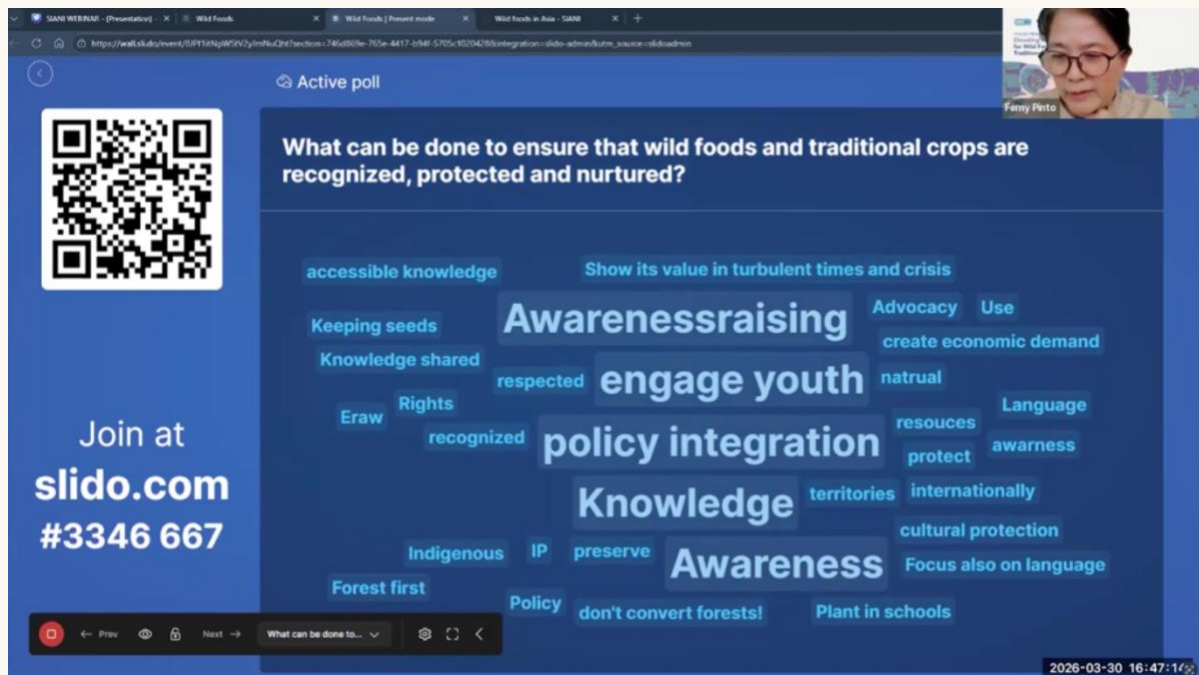


Figure 2. Mentimeter responses for what can be done to ensure wild foods and traditional crops are recognized, protected, and nurtured

The emerging themes revolved around themes of gaining awareness and knowledge through accessible information, youth engagement with ancestral food heritage, the integration of protection and preservation of natural habitats into formal policy, and the importance of cultural protection while maintaining environmental and economic stability for future generations.

- **Awareness and knowledge.** The terms “Knowledge,” “Awareness,” and “Awareness raising” were central to the discussion. Participants emphasized the importance of “accessible knowledge” and “knowledge shared” a priority, alongside “focusing on language” and documenting the value of these crops during “turbulent times and crisis.”
- **Engage youth.** Practical suggestions included “keeping seeds” and “plant in schools” to foster a connection between the next generation and their ancestral food heritage.
- **Policy integration.** A call for policy work to “protect” and “preserve” natural habitats, specifically the directive to “don’t convert forests!” and “forest first” so that traditional crops have the space to thrive. This was supported by specific calls for “recognized,” rights,” and “territories.”
- **Cultural and economic sustainability.** Responses such as “cultural protection,” “Indigenous,” “IP,” and “create economic demand” pointed to the need for a holistic approach that respects the identity of local communities while ensuring the practical viability of traditional agriculture.

This interactive session underscored that protecting wild foods is not just a technical task but a social and political one, requiring a blend of school-based education, policy work, and local documentation to ensure these traditions remain a living part of the landscape.

This webinar was designed as a cross-network dialogue bridging two networks together. The initial segment of the presentation was led by the Wild Foods in Asia Expert Group supported by SIANI, many of whom also hold affiliations with NTFP-EP Asia. Following a brief intermission, the second half of the session transitioned to insights shared by members of the Indigenous-Led Education (ILED) network.

The presentations were deliberately curated as a collective dialogue between the speakers and the virtual audience, serving as a mindful exploration of ways to safeguard and disseminate both formal and informal strategies for wild food and traditional crop preservation across diverse communities and generations.

The slide features a background with a stylized map of Asia in shades of green, purple, and pink. At the top left, there are logos for NTFP-EP, siani, and The ILED Network. The main title is 'VOICES FROM ASIA: Elevating Champions for Wild Foods and Traditional Crops'. Below the title, it says 'ZOOM WEBINAR (ONLINE ONLY) 30 March 2026 (Mon) | 16:30 - 19:00 Philippine Standard Time'. On the left, there are social media links for www.ntfp.org, info@ntfp.org, facebook.com/ntfpep, and @ntfp_ep. On the right, under the heading 'Meet our Speakers:', there are five circular portraits of speakers with their names and affiliations: Madhu Ramnath (NTFP-EP India), Veronika Heni (Riak Bumi), Arjun Singh Nag (LEAF, Central India), Nemia F. Gareza (Sentrang Peralatan dan Inga Agta (SPA)), and Moo Shee (Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)).

Figure 3. Voices From Asia: Elevating Champions for Wild Foods and Traditional Crops' Speaker Slide

Presentation 1 | Learning from each other: the Indian experience of Adivasi villages

Madhu Ramnath (Coordinator, NTFP-EP India) & Arjun Singh Nag (Founder, LEAF)

The presentation opened with a joint sharing by two members of the Wild Foods Asia Expert Group, Madhu Ramnath and Arjun Nag. Their collaborative sharing provided deep insights on the intersection of wild food, language, and knowledge transfer.

Madhu shared his insights from his decades-long immersion with the Durwa and Batra peoples of the Bastar District in Chhattisgarh. He challenged the common view of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) as mere commodities for livelihood, instead he framed wild foods as the very core of Adivasi culture.

Traditional foods as Indigenous calendars

He illustrated how food in these communities dictate indigenous calendars through first fruit ceremonies that determine the rhythm of their social and spiritual life. He said that the multigenerational knowledge about these crops produces microclimatic data. For example, the specific order in which mushrooms sprout serves as a "living weather station," signaling deeper climatic shifts or the state of the monsoons.



Figure 4. Madhu Ramnath sharing multilingual wild food posters

The Missing Link framework

Madhu argued that when a specific food begins to disappear from a community's diet, it is a signal of a "missing link" in either the necessary skill or the resource availability. He posited that by understanding and precisely identifying this gap is the only way to design effective conservation interventions.

Dioscorea (wild yams) as a case study

To illustrate this, he cited the example of *Dioscorea* (yams). Madhu described their identification as a “botanist’s nightmare” because the leaves often wilt just as the tuber is ready for harvest. Success requires an intimate knowledge of the stems, and the dry-season earth a skill that must be passed down to ensure these staples are not lost to time.

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Procuring wild foods is an active physical language consisting of specific skills like diking streams, tracking, digging, and even using plant poisons to stupefy fish.

– Madhu Ramnath

Impoverishment of language to biodiversity decline

A primary concern raised during the exchange was the direct correlation between the decline of biodiversity and the diminishing lexicon of most Indigenous cultures. As physical forest species disappears, the specific terms referring to the skills and resources of hundreds of species of gathered food. This impoverishment of language as also losing the ecological nuances of those species impacts the collective memory of a generation and the next.

“

What has turned out to be very crucial to me is language. Any culture has its daily vocabulary—with its daily use of language—we often tend to forget that there is a vast terminology which pertains specifically to food gathering.

– Madhu Ramnath

Women and youth as stewards of forest wild foods

To combat this, he and his colleague, Arjun Nag, established targeted interventions in Central India. Working with two communities, they have facilitated the creation of women-and-youth led groups and the development of biodiversity demonstration plots. These plots contained 50 to 100 forest species, functioning as informal learning spaces, where the traditional lexicon of wild food is revitalized through practice. This led to many women establishing their own kitchen gardens for household consumption and improved health.



Figure 5. Arjun Singh Nag sharing on their experiences

Linguistic revitalization and institutional presence

Nag elaborated their practical dissemination of the educational materials they have developed. They distributed it to primary and middle schools across the Bastar district to re-center wild edible plants in the minds of the younger generation.

The posters utilize a multilingual format. It incorporated Gondi¹, Halbi², Dhruva³, and Hindi⁴, alongside scientific names. This linguistic approach reinforces the specific vocabulary of food gathering in native tongues. These materials have transitioned from classrooms to Panchayat (council) houses, serving as a constant visual reminder of the link between biodiversity and cultural identity.

¹ A South-Central Dravidian language spoken in the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and by small minorities in neighboring states

² An Eastern Indo-Aryan language spoken across central part of India

³ A Central Dravidian language, which is considered as an endangered language, spoken by the Paraja people in Bastar district, Chhattisgarh and Odisha in Koraput district, India

⁴ A major Indo-Aryan language spoken primarily in India

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We expect to have more regular exchanges between these two villages, to exchange plant material to increase the diversity in the demonstration plots, and for the schools to interact. We hope that this process, which is going to take many years, will continue.

– Arjun Singh Nag

Systemic drivers of wild food decline

Their presentation concluded with identifying two critical systemic barriers that hinder the utilization and preservation of wild foods:

- **Time Poverty.** The labor-intensive nature of harvesting and processing wild species is difficult for modern youth to maintain alongside contemporary education and work schedules.
- **Restricted Access.** The declaration of National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries in India has physically barred Indigenous peoples from their ancestral forests, preventing access to the very resources their cultures are built upon.

Discussion Points

Following the presentation, an interactive Question-and-Answer session opened with an insightful inquiry from Zi Hui Kew, a researcher working with hunter-gatherer and foraging communities in Malaysia. Her questions highlighted two common challenges in field-based conservation: cultural resistance to sedentary agriculture and the technical difficulties of identifying lost species.

1. **The Sedentary Bias and the Value of Mobility**

The discussion fundamentally challenged the assumption that planting is the only valid form of conservation.

- **Nomadic and semi-nomadic groups are primary repository of ecological wisdom.** Madhu Ramnath argued that the survival of their knowledge depends on a fluid, landscape-scale relationship with the forest, rather than being tethered to a static plot.
- **Sedentary agriculture as a threat to forest biodiversity.** In a critical defense of traditional foraging, Madhu described that fixed cultivation as the beginning of the end for forests. He suggested that researchers should respect nomadic interactions rather than forcing a transition to sedentary agriculture.

2. **The Scientific Yardstick vs. Traditional Nomenclature**

A significant technical roadblock was identified which was the difficulty of cataloging invisible species where only an indigenous name survives without a current physical specimen.

- **The Documentation Gap.** Madhu explained that formal scientific identification requires a physical sample, or a “yardstick,” to trace through taxonomic families. Without a specimen to photograph or mount, local names, though culturally rich, remain invisible to formal science.
- **In-Situ Research.** Femy Pinto (Executive Director, NTFP-EP Asia) noted that the most effective counter-strategy is community-level research. By identifying plants in situ as they are actively harvested, practitioners can bridge the gap between traditional names and scientific records.

3. **Policy Barriers to Traditional Lifestyles**

The Q&A session mentioned how modern protected area (PA) designations and state policies often create legal barriers. It concluded that while mobility is ecologically superior for these landscapes, these frameworks make nomadic lifestyles and traditional foraging nearly impossible to sustain, which forces a choice between cultural survival and legal compliance.

Presentation 2 | Philippines Wild foods and traditional crops curriculum development for Sentrong Paaralan ng mga Agta (SPA)- process, results and learnings

Nemia F. Gareza (Principal, Sentrong Paaralan ng mga Agta (SPA) – General Nakar, Quezon Province, Philippines)

Nemia Gareza presented the transformative work of the Sentrong Paaralan ng mga Agta (SPA) in the Sierra Madre Mountains. Established in 1987, SPA provides culturally-rooted elementary and junior high school programs that interfaces the Department of Education (DepEd) standards with Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP).

Ancestral Domain as classroom philosophy

Central to their philosophy is the belief that the Ancestral Domain is not merely a territory, but a web of relationships involving the environment, spirits, and the creator, Makidapat⁵. This foundational view drives the school's mission to prevent brain drain by producing professionals who remain anchored in their heritage, eventually returning to lead their communities toward self-determination rather than assimilating into urban centers.



Figure 6. Nemia F. Garenza presenting the Curriculum Framework of the Central School of the Agta Peoples (SPA)

⁵ The Supreme Being in the traditional belief system of the Dumagat indigenous peoples

The community life cycle curriculum

The most significant technical breakthrough of the SPA model is its Community Life Cycle Curriculum, which utilizes a contextualized academic calendar that follows the natural rhythm of the environment rather than a standard bureaucratic schedule. The school year is structured around seasonal resources.

COMMUNITY LIFE CYCLE

- **Jan–Mar:** Clearing farms, planting vegetables, gathering wild foods
- **Apr–May:** Planting upland rice/corn, hunting, fishing
- **Jun–Aug:** Fishing, harvesting rice/corn, root crops, hunting, honey gathering
- **Sep–Oct:** Hunting, gathering wild foods, planting banana
- **Nov–Dec:** Harvesting rice, cleaning farms, fishing

The slide includes three photographs: a person fishing in a river, a group of people in a forest, and a group of children in a classroom.

Figure 7. Community Life Cycle of SPA

In this model, indigenous elders serve as culture bearers within the formal classroom, teaching students sophisticated skills in gathering and preparation. This pedagogy ensures that youth view their heritage as a vital survival system rather than an outdated practice.

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The main concern of the elders is how to ensure that the youth will continue to value Indigenous food, or their culture as a whole...so the school ensures that the Indigenous knowledge or the whole Dumagat culture is embedded in the curriculum.

- *Nemia F. Gareza*

The taste divide and pandemic lessons

Furthermore, Mrs. Gareza identified a growing phenomenon she called “Taste Divide”. This is a geographical and digital shift where youth in accessible areas are increasingly drawn to processed foods through exposure from digital gadgets. This leads to an erosion of traditional dietary habits.

However, a critical lesson in resilience emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic with interior communities with intact wild food systems remaining entirely self-sufficient for two years, whereas those near urban centers faced acute hunger.

By organizing women as the primary food champions and integrating wild food modules into the curriculum, SPA ensures that the Agta food system remains a living, resilient practice for future generations.

Discussion Points

The subsequent dialogue, initiated by Paul Wolvekamp, explored the tension between traditional foodways and modern dietary trends. Most of the discussions expanded upon topics identified by the presenter. Key takeaways included:

1. The Geographical Taste Divide

This phenomenon called as taste divide emphasized the presenter became a focus in the conservation. A growing contrast exists based on the physical and digital accessibility. Youth in remote, interior communities maintain their indigenous diets, while those in more accessible areas gravitate toward commercial fast food amplified by the digital gadget culture.

2. Biological Erosion of the Palate

A persistent observation was made that the prevalence of processed foods possibly physically alters the taste buds of the younger generation. This shift makes it increasingly difficult for youth to appreciate the complex or bitter flavor profiles of traditional forest staples, such as *Dioscorea* (wild yams).

3. The Pandemic Proof of Food Sovereignty

Gareza reiterated the definitive lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic. Interior communities with intact wild food systems remained entirely self-sufficient for two years without government aid. Conversely, communities near urban centers that had transitioned to market-dependent diets faced acute hunger when supply chains broke.

4. Institutional & Human Resource Challenges

While SPA has the legal leeway to contextualize national standards, it struggles to retain staff who are often lured away by higher government salaries. They also face the challenge of finding teachers who appreciate the Indigenous-focused education approach. Despite this, the school has successfully produced homegrown licensed teachers who have returned to serve their own community.

5. Intergenerational Role of Women

The session concluded by reinforcing that Agta women are the primary elder-teachers and food champions. Their daily practice of food preparation is the most effective vehicle for ensuring that Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) remain a lived reality.

Knowledge Sprint/ Ideas Harvesting

Break Out Rooms Session

In between the first and second part of the presentations, the forum moved into the Knowledge Sprint. This a structured segment designed for rapid speed dating style networking to harvest regional ideas. Participants were ushered into breakout rooms for a condensed 20-minute window of dialogue, guided by a specific set of questions, which are shown below in Figure 8.



Figure 8. Guided questions for the knowledge sprint/ ideas harvesting

This interactive sprint allowed the global audience to move from passive listening to active engagements. The additional country-specific information from the participants supplements and connects with the formal presentations on some innovations and similarities of their distinguished practical, grounded realities of forest conservation and traditional knowledge.

After the designated screen break, Tanya Conlu, the ILED Southeast Asia Coordinator, reconvened the plenary to harvest reflections from the Knowledge Sprint. She invited volunteers to share key takeaways from their breakout rooms, facilitating a cross-pollination of ideas from across the region and beyond.

Paul Wolvekamp volunteered to start sharing and provided a synthesis from several country-specific observations that emerged from his own small-group exchanges:

- **Laos:** Traditional food remains a seamless extension of the overall food system. Even in urban areas, foraging along streets is common, supported by an online library, which is the [Pha Khao Lao](#), that catalogs traditional foods, their names, and ingredients.
- **Indonesia:** In West Kalimantan, the Illipe nut was highlighted as a dual-purpose resource, serving as both a fuel source and a central culinary ingredient. Food festivals in the region are proving to be vital foods for re-engaging the youth.
- **Philippines:** A sobering observation came from Jonie from Mindanao, who estimated that there may only be **a ten-year window** to transfer indigenous knowledge before it erodes completely, underscoring the urgent need to accelerate these exchanges.

Olivia Melendrez from NTFP-EP Philippines shared the results of her breakout group's discussion, which included participants from Vietnam and Sweden:

- **Vietnam:** Collaborative efforts are underway to document *Dioscorea* (yam) species. With 40 species already recorded, participants noted significant overlaps between Vietnam and the Philippines, opening the door for future comparative studies.
- **Philippines:** Olivia also reinforced Mrs. Nemia's earlier points on her presentation, noting that even the most remote areas are now facing digital influence through affordable Piso Wi-Fi (1-to-5-peso internet access). This accessibility makes the integration of wild foods into the formal school curriculum a crucial intervention to ensure that traditional knowledge can compete with the rapid reach of the internet.
- **Global North:** Alice from SIANI noted that while local Asian crops are often missing from the agenda in countries like Sweden, the genuine, locally-based stories shared during the webinar served as a powerful inspiration for the global conservation movement.

With these reflections setting the stage, Tanya closed the plenary sharing and transitioned the program into the second half of the webinar to introduce the next set of presenters focused on Indigenous Led Education (ILED).

Presentation 3 | Knowledge systems and use of wild foods within Karen/K'nyaw

Saw Moo Shee, Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)

The third presentation shifted the focus to the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN). Saw Moo Shee illustrated how the Karen people maintain a sophisticated self-governance system through the Karen National Union (KNU), even amidst prolonged political instability.

Governance through traditional knowledge

For the Karen, biodiversity management is not a hobby, but a survival strategy governed by traditional laws. The community enforces strict rules for different forest zones, including conservation areas, rotational farming lands, and community-use forests. Knowledge is transmitted through daily physical observation, allowing the community to synchronize their lives with the forest's reproductive cycles.

Women as biodiversity guardians through documentation

A standout technical highlight was the role of the Women's Research Group. In Karen culture, women are the primary holders of specialized knowledge regarding wild foods and medicinal plants. By documenting indigenous fish, mushrooms, and orchids, women act as biodiversity guardians. This documentation is used as a formal tool to assert indigenous rights to their territory against external modern pressures and climate change.



Figure 9. Saw Moo Shee presenting the knowledge systems and use of wild foods within Karen communities

The nutrition-healthcare connection

Moo Shee highlighted the blurred line between food and medicine in Karen State. Many wild plants collected for daily nutrition double as traditional medicines. In areas with limited access to modern clinics, forest-derived herbs processed by local healers provide the only available medical care, proving that food sovereignty is health sovereignty.

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Community-led research helps us improve biodiversity conservation. It is one way to maintain our mutual relationship between forest and our Karen community.

- Saw Moo Shee

Presentation 4 | Kapuas Hulu's Timeless Treasures: Preserving Heritage and Traditional Food through Festivals and Celebrations

Veronika Heni, Riak Bumi

The final presentation focused on the Riak Bumi Foundation's work in Kapuas Hulu in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Veronika Heni illustrated how traditional food systems are not just subsistence strategies but tools for social solidarity and ecosystem conservation.



Figure 10. Veronika Heni presenting on how to preserve heritage and traditional food through festivals and celebration

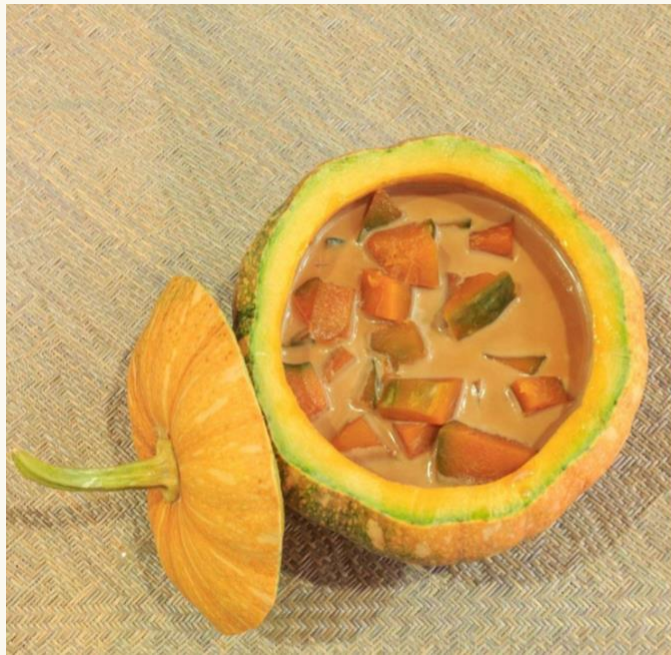
The festival as a knowledge meeting point

Riak Bumi utilizes the Gawai⁶ as a strategic platform for intergenerational transfer. In 2025, A traditional cooking competition involved 40 senior high school students tasked with using Illipe nuts⁷, famously known as tengkawang butter. This reintroduces a high-value forest commodity to youth who may otherwise gravitate toward imported fats and oils.

The festivals integrate storytelling, traditional games, and music, ensuring that the sense of pride in Dayak and Malay identity is reinforced through joy rather than just academic study. Heni shared a [YouTube link of a recording showing their festival celebration](#) to provide a glimpse how they showcase their food heritage.

⁶ An annual traditional festival that marks the end of the harvest season and the new planting year

⁷ A fat-rich fruit from *Shorea* species trees native to Borneo.



THE ESSENCE OF CULINARY HERITAGE

Fundamental and intrinsic aspects of traditional cooking and food practices that define a particular **cultural identity**

It encompasses **unique flavors, techniques, ingredients, and cultural significance**

- Fresh and locally sourced ingredients
- Sustainable “packaging”

Malay and Dayak traditional food:
Unique and flavorful culinary heritage of
Kapuas Hulu

Figure 11. Sustainable pumpkin packaging from Veronika Heni’s presentation

Indigenous food systems as eco-friendly practices

Heni emphasized that indigenous food systems are inherently zero-waste and adheres to the slow food movement. By serving pumpkin soup in its own shell, the community demonstrates a traditional alternative to modern plastic packaging. The foundation campaigns for the responsible harvest of forest honey and Illipe nuts. They also teach techniques that extract resources without damaging the forest’s regenerative capacity.

“

This traditional festival becomes the meeting point between the elders and the students to share knowledge about the recipes and how they take the plants, the food from the forests, and how they are still managed

- Veronika Heni

Documentation for Bhinneka Tunggal Ika

To prevent the death of recipes, Riak Bumi has documented traditional methods into simple booklets. These booklets preserve specific methods, such as the use of wood-fired stoves, which are essential for both flavor profiles and community self-sufficiency. These food celebrations adhere to the Indonesian philosophy of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika⁸. This helps foster solidarity across different ethnicities and religions through shared culinary heritage.

⁸ This is the official national motto of Indonesia, translating to “Unity in Diversity”

Insights and Future Pathways

The presentations and exchanges proved that a close relationship with, and a deep education in, wild foods is not just about nutrition—it is about Bio-cultural Survival.

The Voices from Asia: Elevating Champions for Wild Foods and Traditional Crops webinar proved that traditional crops are the most resilient blueprint we have for a climate-uncertain future. To preserve the taste of the forest is to preserve the forest itself. A close relationship, education, and understanding of wild foods and traditional crops is significant in the preservation of our way of life and of our biodiversity.

By fostering this education and understanding, the protection of biodiversity will be achieved alongside the safeguarding of a way of life that is essential to the collective global heritage.

Key Reflections

Tanya Conlu invited key partners to provide their final reflections and takeaways.

Paul Wolvekamp, Co-Founder of Both ENDS and a member of the ILED Secretariat, expressed profound encouragement but offered a sobering wake-up call. Citing earlier remarks from other attendees he heard from his breakout room, he reiterated that there is a critical ten-year window to preserve Indigenous knowledge, language, and skills before the older generation passes away.

He lauded the very concrete methods shared for engaging youth, such as the high school food festivals and traditional games, and noted that the health benefits of traditional foods serve as a powerful "selling point" against the modern fast-food industry. For Wolvekamp, the webinar reinforced that the forest is the essential foundation for these diverse food and belief systems, acting as a vital anchor for maintaining harmony and "unity in diversity" in a complex geopolitical world.

Alice Tunfjord, Agriculture, Land, and Bioeconomy Team Project Manager at the Swedish International Agricultural Network Initiative (SIANI), highlighted the role of SIANI's expert groups in bridging the gap between local action and global knowledge. She reflected on the long-standing partnership with NTFP-EP Asia, noting how this specific expert group has successfully recorded the immense value of forest and wild foods in a very short time.

Tunfjord particularly praised the genuine storytelling approach used throughout the presentations, identifying it as a key tool for reaching a global audience. She concluded by affirming SIANI's commitment to community-centered and regional learning, expressing hope that the legacy of this collaborative work and the connections with the ILED Network would continue to sustain indigenous food systems well into the future.

Conclusion

Femy Pinto, NTFP-EP Asia and SIANI Wild Foods Asia Expert Group

Femy Pinto brought the webinar to a close by extending her sincere gratitude to the contributors, presenters, and the global audience for their active participation. She noted that the high volume of comments and questions, alongside the warm energy in the breakout rooms, demonstrated a deep communal commitment to the subject. She noted that the presentations from four different countries provided a practical roadmap for the goal to ensure wild foods and traditional crops remain protected and nurtured.

While acknowledging that the session offered only a snapshot of the extensive work happening on the ground, Pinto emphasized that these presentations revealed a powerful truth:

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Indigenous knowledge systems are not isolated practices. They are inextricably linked to holistic health, the preservation of indigenous languages, and a deep sense of pride and identity.

- Femy Pinto

She observed that these systems uncover a vast array of ground-level realities that require continued cooperation and sharing between communities and their supporters to keep the traditions thriving.

Addressing the future of the initiative, Pinto informed the participants that while the specific project funding was set to conclude at the end of the month, the mission would endure through the permanent existence of the NTFP-EP and ILED networks.

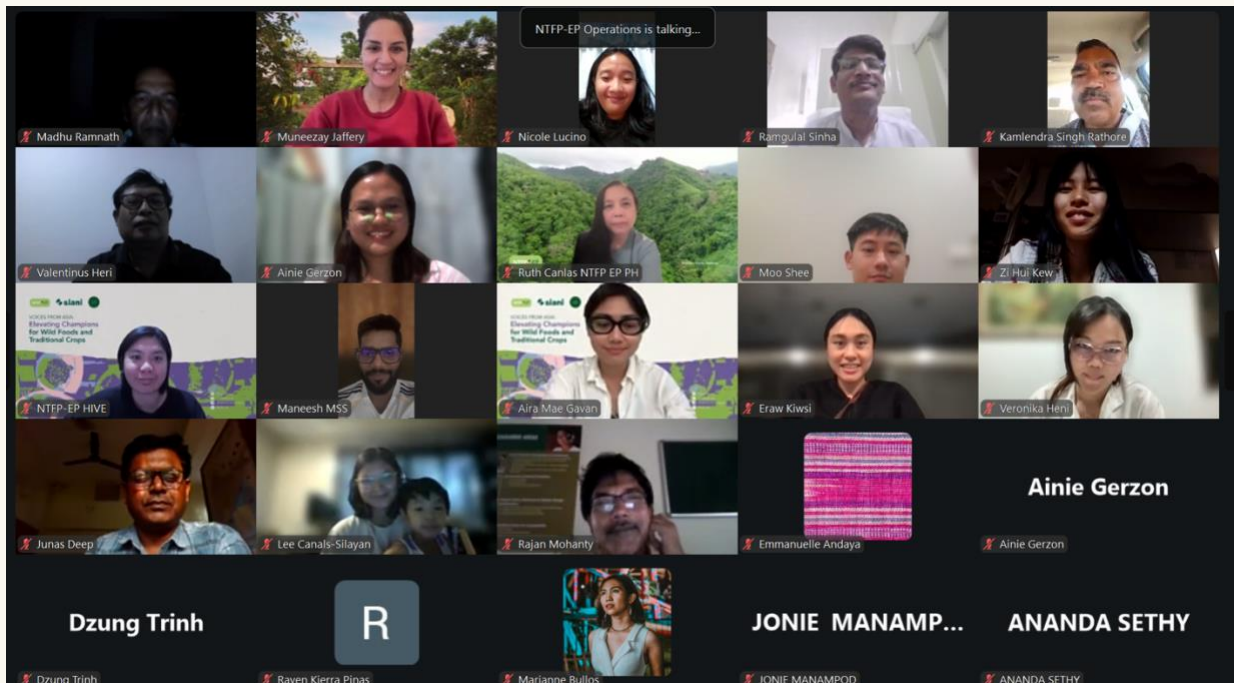
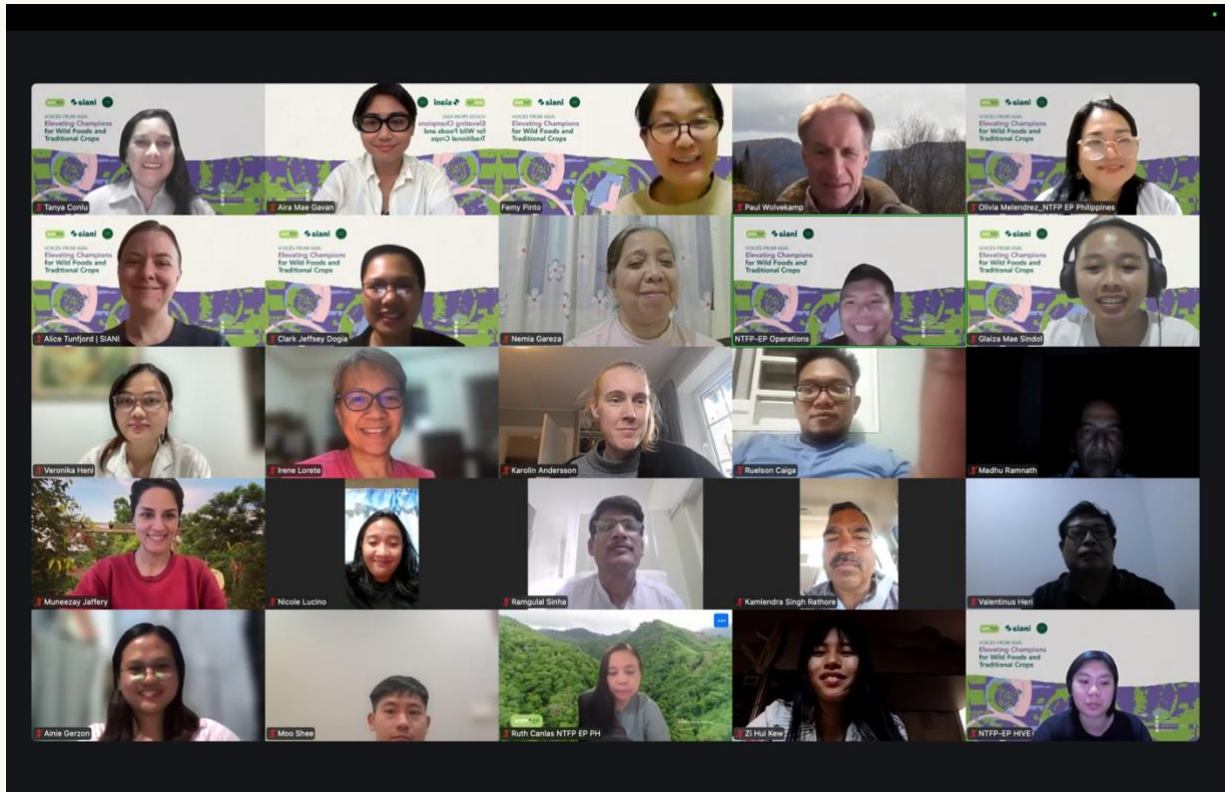
To wrap up the program, the Executive Director of NTFP-EP Asia outlined the path forward through a three-pronged action plan:

1. **Maintain the Platform.** Continue the regional sharing of documentation methods to foster collaborations.
2. **Expand the Evidence Base.** Encourage more meaningful research, specifically involving Indigenous women and youth, to uncover and recover the vast ground-level realities still hidden.
3. **Accessibility.** Ensure recordings and documentation remains widely available through wildfoodsAsia.com, the [SIANI platform](#), and the [NTFP-EP website](#).

The event concluded with a celebratory virtual group photo, with Pinto wishing the researchers and practitioners the best of luck in their ongoing efforts to protect the region's diverse food heritage.

ANNEX I

GROUP PHOTO



ANNEX II

WEBINAR PROGRAMME

Time	Topic	Discussion/ Reflection Guide	Resource Person
4:20	Zoom opens 5-10 minutes before the start	Play soft music Project 3 slides: Webinar Title Slide, Speaker Slide and Reminders – about use of the chat, interpretation available in Hindi	NTFP-EP Asia tech (Oliver and Lyra)
4:30	Welcome from SIANI EG Wild Foods in Asia Intro about SIANI Intro about the EG on Wild Foods in Asia Intro about the Webinar		Femy Pinto, NTFP-EP Asia and SIANI Wild Foods Asia Expert Group
	Mentimeter	How can we work together to ensure that wild foods and traditional crops are protected and nurtured?	NTFP-EP Asia
4:55	Introduce speakers and programme		Femy Pinto, NTFP-EP Asia and Wild Foods Asia Expert Group
5:00	1 st Presentation - India Learning from each other: the Indian experience of adivasi villages Q & A (up to 2 questions only)		Madhu Ramnath, NTFP-EP India Arjun Singh Nag, LEAF, Central India
5:20	2 nd Presentation – Philippines Wild foods and traditional crops curriculum development for Sentrong Paaralan ng mga Agta (SPA)- process, results and learnings Q&A (up to 2 questions only)		Nemia F. Gareza Principal Sentrong Paaralan ng mga Agta (SPA) General Nakar, Quezon Province Philippines
5:40	Screen Break	*Play Music	

5:45	Knowledge Sprint/Ideas Harvesting	<p>Prepare 18 Breakout rooms</p> <p>Introduce one question for Knowledge Sprint/Ideas Harvesting</p> <p>GUIDE QUESTIONS (will put in canva slides) - c/o Mich</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who are you and where are you from? 2. Why are you interested in this topic? 3. What are you most curious about this topic? 4. What is one key insight you would like to share? 5. Any questions, suggestions, you would like to leave the group? 	Femy Pinto, NTFP-EP Asia, will introduce and pass on to Tanya Conlu, ILED Southeast Asia Coordinator
5:55	Brief plenary sharing	Reflections from the 1 st part of the programme	Tanya Conlu ILED Southeast Asia Coordinator
6:10	3 rd presentation ILED presentation – KESAN Knowledge systems and use of wild foods within Karen/K'nyaw communities		Moo Shee Kesan
6:30	4 th presentation ILED presentation – Kapuas Hulu's Timeless Treasures: Preserving Heritage and Traditional Food through Festivals and Celebrations		Veronika Heni Riak Bumi
6:50	Participants Reflections		ILED – Paul Wolvekamp, Co-Founder SIANI - Alice Tunfjord, Project Manager
7:00	Conclusion and wrap-up		Femy Pinto, NTFP-EP Asia



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