



CAN YOU Believe it?

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR GORDON HOWARTH

Natural remedies

How protecting our wildlife will safeguard our future.

OVERSEAS countries often taunt Australians, claiming we are bordering on the verge of cannibalism as we will actually eat the animals represented on our coat of arms. However, some recent discoveries suggest perhaps maybe we'll have the last laugh. A surprising number of medicinal properties are being discovered in products sourced from our Australian fauna.

The common emu is a good example. The large flightless bird – which coincidentally seems to delight in trying to intimidate wary tourists – has been farmed and hunted for its meat since ancient times. It is only recently that science has recognised that oil derived from the emu may have a wide range of medicinal properties.

Emu oil has long been credited with the ability to relieve muscle stiffness when applied topically, and many arthritis sufferers also swear to its effectiveness at alleviating inflamed joints. Wound healing, however, was probably the property most sought after by our indigenous ancestors, especially those unfortunate enough to end up on the wrong end of a spear.

South Australian scientists are focusing closely on these claims. In fact, scientific studies are now under way in Adelaide investigating emu oil for its potential to reduce the harmful side effects of chemotherapy on the intestine. Early indications are that emu oil is capable of reducing this damage.

Emu oil is now being further pursued as a potential means of decreasing bowel inflammation in other serious bowel conditions such as ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease.

When it comes to Australian fauna, however, emus are not our only source of new medicines.

Snake and reptile venoms have long provided valuable information for the development of new pharmaceutical drugs, such as certain anti-coagulants and heart medications.

While some may consider this exciting, perhaps greater discoveries are still to come.

Recently, venom extracted from the platypus has opened a number of new avenues of investigation for the discovery and development of more powerful therapeutic agents.

Our fauna is beginning to show great promise as a rich, under-explored source of new medicinal agents. However, this sends a sobering message to us all that we must protect all species from the dangers of extinction.

The compounds derived from any one of these marvellous creatures could one day provide the key to a longer and healthier life for us all. When that anonymous Dutch sailor unknowingly killed

HIDDEN CURES

- Australian Aborigines were not the only indigenous people to discover medicinal properties in native animals.
- Polynesians have long been using oil extracted from the New Zealand green-lipped mussel for relief of joint pain.
- Eskimos recognised the health benefits of fish oil hundreds of years before western societies.
- Australia's abundant supply of unique plant life is essentially untapped with respect to its medicinal potential.
- Some of our plentiful native insects and fungi may also be rich sources of bioactivity.



the last dodo on the island of Mauritius in the late 1600s, he may very well have denied us a precious source of cures for a wide range of medical conditions. Perhaps we will never know if the doomed dodo was a rich source of new medical knowledge.

However, in a strange irony, mankind may be able to resurrect some of these lost species.

An example of this may be the recently published work of scientists from Melbourne who incorporated DNA from the extinct Tasmanian tiger into a developing mouse.

Although we are a long way from Jurassic Park, the advent of modern molecular biology and cloning techniques may mean mankind will have a second chance at discovering some unique disease treatments and cures now hidden within our present, and possibly prehistoric, fauna.

How about the kangaroo? Will big red also prove to be a source of powerful therapeutics? Well, I guess that's food for thought.

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