

Entomophagy Anthropology

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Eating insects, or entomophagy, is touted as a healthy and environmentally responsible food source of which we should be taking greater advantage. Present-day consumption of insects is minimal in developed countries, but there are small businesses popping up around the United States to bring this food to the masses and begin a conversation about their benefits. In May 2013, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) released an extensive report—201 pages, to be exact—titled “[Edible insects: Future prospects for food and feed security](#).” The paper voiced their support for future investigations of insects as a sustainable food source for feeding the world’s growing populations. They outlined the four major areas that need to be further investigated in order to make this proposal a reality: nutrition, environmental impacts, socio-economic factors, and legal framework. An anthropological perspective is important in each of these areas in order for the proposed benefits of entomophagy to be realized.

My [own work](#) focuses on the nutritional contributions of insects to the human diet. Insects are highly diverse, and even during different life stages, insects can be highly variable in their nutritional contributions. It is necessary to not only obtain nutritional values from some insects that people eat, but also to make these values *standardized* and *comparable* for as many of the [nearly 2000 recorded edible insects](#) as possible. I also believe that understanding *how* insects are consumed around the world, as well as over the course of human evolution, is important in this entomophagy movement. I have recently launched the [insects-as-food survey](#). I ask field researchers, no matter their discipline, to report observations of people or nonhuman primates eating insects around the globe. Observations can be anecdotal or well documented, and the population can be the focus of study or another population the participant has spent significant time among (such as an archaeologist’s host community). The ultimate goal of the survey is to (1) identify general global patterns, (2) initiate the development of a global database of standardized scientific identifications, nutritional values, and isotope signatures, and (3) get more people thinking about the benefits of this food source that we underutilize in Western society.

The biggest push for insect cultivation comes from an environmental perspective—that it is “greener” to raise “mini-livestock” than it is to tend our current go-to protein sources of cattle and pigs. *The Economist* recently published a great [graphic](#) that illustrates the difference in input and output between insects and other cultivated animal food sources. Insects require less feed per unit weight of food produced, often have a lower output of greenhouse gases, and some even have more protein per fresh weight than beef or fish. Most of these figures are based on our understanding of raising insects as feed for pets and other animals. If insects become common in our Western diet, production will need to increase, but since insects require less land, feed, and water than our other cultivated animal protein sources, they will have less of an impact on our natural resources.

Additionally, it also might be helpful to think about this movement at a small scale as well. What would it take to get small, DIY kits like [these](#) more available? What if urban farms and community gardens had them? Of course, here in the United States, many people do not view bugs as a food source, often because there is a certain disgust factor related to their form. But what if the insects being reared were turned into [flour](#) and incorporated into baked goods sold at local stores?

Although I do not presume to think that people will immediately reduce their meat consumption when presented with an alternative like insects, the acceptance of insects as a food source within the US might prove important to the success of a global movement.

More importantly, the FAO report states that there are areas of the world where the environment is incapable of supporting large animal cultivation but it may be able to support insect cultivation. Although there are many regions around the world that already have insects in their diets, this is not true for every locality needing aid. There are plenty of regions where insects are not considered food, and there are other regions where the insects they eat may not be appropriate for large-scale production, for instance, [termites are some of the world's largest methane producers](#). The socio-economic factors involved with insects as food are not only the cost of rearing insects and how to make the food available, but also their social acceptance. How does the introduction of insect-based foods to a developing country work if the people there are not interested in eating them?

Anthropology can provide the framework necessary for figuring out how insect ingredients can be incorporated into different dishes that people might enjoy, both here in the United States and across the world. Anthropologists understand that culture is important in food choice, and this is a key perspective that the entomophagy movement needs in order to be successful.

*If you would like your work or news featured in the Anthropology and Environment Society's Section News column, please contact **Patrick Gallagher** (pmg70@stanford.edu) or **Ariela Zycherman** (azych@uic.edu).*

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