

Eating insects has long made sense in Africa. The world must catch up

By [Saliou Niassy, Sunday Ekesi](#)

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Eating insects is as old as [mankind](#). Globally, 2 billion people consume insects, a practise known as entomophagy. It is more common in Africa than anywhere else [in the world](#). The continent is home to the richest diversity of edible insects – more than [500 species](#) ranging from caterpillars (Lepidoptera) to termites (Isoptera), locusts, grasshoppers, crickets (Orthoptera), ants and bees (Hymenoptera), bugs (Heteroptera and Homoptera) and beetles (Coleoptera).



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The dominant insect eating countries are the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and South Africa. The most commonly eaten insects include [caterpillars](#), [termites](#), [crickets](#) and [palm weevils](#).

Scientists have [long proposed](#) insects as feed or foodstuff for animals. But views about entomophagy differ widely: food conscious lobbies and scientists promote insects as [novel foods](#) while at the other extreme people view eating insects [as crazy](#). Between those two extremes are communities that have been practising entomophagy for ages.

Most edible insects are harvested from the wild. Little effort has been put into how they could be mass produced and used as a source of protein more generally. To do this, it's important that the biodiversity of edible insects is understood better, and that indigenous knowledge is uncovered.

To get even this far, however, attitudes to entomophagy need to change. The Food and Agriculture Organisation, anticipating scarcities of agricultural land and water as well as nutrients as the world's population increases, has spearheaded a fierce [propaganda campaign](#) promoting the benefits of entomophagy. Despite this there is still a reluctance to use insects as food. Added to this is the fact that current biodiversity conservation efforts, unfortunately, overlook the world of insects.

This needs to change.

What's in a name?

Documenting indigenous knowledge systems would be a useful way to promote entomophagy. One of the challenges is that African dialects don't necessarily provide descriptions that could be used in scientific knowledge. Often species are described based on visual features according to the host plants they feed off or the seasons in which they occur.

By contrast, the French term for insect – *la bestiole* – refers generally to a variety of disgusting insects like flies, cockroaches, bugs or even spiders (which of course are not insects) unfit for human consumption.

□
Africans have never considered edible insects as pests or a nuisance.
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But people living in Africa have never considered edible insects as pests or a nuisance. Perhaps we need to think of a new appellation for edible insects to kill the disgust factor. A simple language analogy between 30 ethnic groups in 12 sub-Saharan countries provided tentative names for edible termites. These are, “*Tsiswa*”, “*Chiswa*”, “*Chintuga*”, “*Inswa*”, “*Iswa*”, “*Sisi*”, “*Ishwa*” or “*Esunsun*”. Any of these indigenous names could be used to market termite based products.

□
Map showing hotspots of edible insects in Africa.
Saliou Niassy

Opportunities and success stories

Insects are rich in nutrients such as [amino acids](#), which are often absent in conventional foods. They have been used as such for ages by indigenous communities like the Mofu living at the border between Cameroon and Nigeria in the Mandara area, the Nganda people living in tropical forests in the DRC and Bushmen in Namibia and South Africa. They can be used as food and also as feed for other [animals or medicine](#).

Given their nutritional value and their potential for mass production, insects could help address the challenge of food security. New entrepreneurship and business opportunities can be incubated in the food and feed systems and pharmaceuticals sectors. This, in turn, would lead to job creation.

Examples of this potential already exist. The caterpillar *Cirina sp* is among the most popular edible insects in west Africa. An enterprise, [FasoPro](#), has developed various products using the insects to contribute [to food security in Burkina Faso](#). Their business model is inclusive, involving local people.

In the DRC a Food and Agricultural Organisation funded project trained hundreds of farmers to domesticate the palm grubs *Rhynchorphorus* sp “Mpose”. This initiative contributed to reducing the clearing of palm ecosystems during harvesting of the valued insect. The same experience has been reported in [Cameroon](#).

But the potential remains largely untapped. Many countries on the continent are eagerly searching for alternative protein sources for animal feed. This is particularly noticeable in the poultry sector where the growing scarcity of resources to produce the ingredients needed for feed has led to an increase in feed costs. Insects could provide a solution.

The major challenge, however, is perception. To uncover the real value of insects, strong education programmes are needed. This can be done through a structured framework covering both inventory, technology upscaling, safety, processing and legislation.

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