

LOOKING AHEAD TO THE IPA WORLD CONGRESS + PROBIOTA AMERICAS 2017

Ghosts of our African guts: What traditional hunter-gatherers can teach us about gut health

By Stephen Daniells+, 18-May-2017

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Understanding how our ancestors lived and how this affected their gut microbiome may boost prebiotic and probiotic formulations, and give companies a compelling story for consumers, says an expert.

Mounting research suggests that westerners harbor a less diverse distal gut microbiota than rural and hunter-gatherer populations, and the destruction of regional (microbial) species pool that may be playing a bigger role in human health than previously expected, explained Jeff Leach, founder of the [Human Food Project](#) and Visiting Research Fellow at King's College London.

Leach is well known in gut health circles, and was co-founder of the [American Gut](#), the world's largest, open-source microbiome project. He's also involved in the commercial [Map My Gut](#) venture. He has spent the last few years living and working among various groups in Africa characterizing the microbiome of rural and hunter-gatherer groups that "might" hold the clues to the ecological disaster known as the modern human gut. Several papers are due out this year on their work.

"The African work is really interesting," Leach told us. *"It's not a clinical study. It's much more about a story."*

Leach has concentrated a lot of attention on the Hadza people in north-central Tanzania. While the majority of the Hadza have started eating agricultural products on a regular basis, a small sub group of the ~1,200 Hadza still get 90% or more of their calories from foraging

"Since the Hadza are still intimately connected to the landscape, it allows a big picture look at the evolution of the microbiome," said Leach. *"It's about connecting the dots between them and the Western microbiome. There is a huge disconnect between how we live and how we used to live - and getting back to a pre-industrial microbiome may be impossible and possibly not even desirable. That said, if you look at nudging the microbiome with products then you may be bumping up against nature."*

Sample collection

Leach has collected 5,000 samples from hundreds of individuals, animals and plants through the wet and dry seasons, and the data shows that the extraordinary microbial diversity enjoyed by hunter-gatherers is linked to the species pool in the area in which they live. In contrast, the diversity of the microbiome of people in the West is more or less half that of the



Image © Jeff Leach



Jeff Leach

East African hunter-gatherers.

“While diet is a variable, it may be our lost connection with nature that sits at the root of what ails us in the so-called modern world,” said Leach.

The question for industry then becomes how much can we make up with diet and products, he said.

“For the prebiotics and probiotics guys, I think the time is ripe for repositioning of products. A lot of consumers have tired of the probiotic message, people are skeptical. They are looking for a story and they’re fascinated by the ancestral and more natural way of living. I’d suggest that companies would do well to package products with a story, and link this back to nature.”

IPA World Congress + Probiota Americas 2017

Jeff Leach will give the opening presentation at the upcoming IPA World Congress + Probiota Americas 2017 conference in San Francisco, June 7-9.

For more information and to register, please click [HERE](#) .



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