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Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

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Inside C2

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Stuck at Mexico border, anti-war Russians sweat their futures as Ukrainians enter U.S.

TIJUANA, Mexico, March 19 (Reuters) - Russians trying to enter the United States at the Mexican border are frustrated they are not getting in like Ukrainians are, despite leaving their homeland over the invasion of Ukraine.

U.S. officials have let dozens of Ukrainians through this week but Russians remain in limbo, prompting some to camp on the pavement alongside a barbed wire border fence, defying warnings from Mexican authorities to leave.

Irina Zolkina, a math teacher who left Moscow with her four children and her daughter's boyfriend, burst into tears when a U.S. border agent on Thursday took one look at her stack of Russian passports and shook his head, saying they would have to wait - soon after officials ushered in six Ukrainian men.

"There are so many years of fear that we're living in ... it's awful inside Russia too," she told Reuters in the Mexican border city of Tijuana opposite San Diego, California.

Zolkina showed Reuters a BBC video of her arrest for attending an anti-war protest on Feb. 24, the day Russia invaded Ukraine in what the Kremlin calls a "special military operation" that Western allies have denounced.

She was released a few hours later and left Russia with her children the following week, she said, passing through Tashkent and Istanbul before reaching the Mexican beach resort of Cancun - a common jumping-off point for Russians heading to the U.S. border.

Over 3 million Ukrainians have become refugees, according to the United Nations, most of them in countries bordering Ukraine. Thousands of Russians have also left their country, according to media reports.

Some Ukrainians crossing in Tijuana have been granted permission to stay in the United States for a year. read more

When asked on Thursday about Ukrainians and Russians at the border, U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said the government was helping people fleeing Ukraine, and that other programs were being considered to expand humanitarian aid.

The U.S.-Mexico border has been closed to most asylum seekers under a coronavirus pandemic policy. read more

A Department of Homeland Security spokesperson, asked about current policy towards Russians, said the agency makes exceptions to the order on a case-by-case basis for "particularly vulnerable individuals."

'UNFAIR'

A couple of dozen other Russians have for several days wrapped themselves in thick blankets to sleep feet from the border wall, hoping U.S. officials will hear their pleas for protection.

"It's unfair that we can't get in," said Mark, 32, a restaurant manager who came from Moscow with his wife, flying to Mexico via Turkey and Germany in early March.

Both were arrested for three days last year after protesting in support of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny, said Mark, who asked to withhold his last name. He said going back to Russia was not an option after new legislation that imposes up to 15 years in jail for actions found to discredit Russia's army.

"This is our decision to be here and wait on the floor," Mark said, seated on a blanket while watching hundreds of tourists and U.S. citizens enter San Diego. "If we leave this place, everyone will forget about this problem immediately."

Between October 2021 and January, U.S. government data showed border officials encountered about 6,400 Russians, some of whom said they were dissidents and are now in the United States. read more The Russian Embassy said in a statement then that it had contacted U.S. authorities about those citizens.

In Tijuana last week, Mexican officials handed out flyers in Russian listing nearby migrant shelters and a letter saying Russians can request asylum but should not camp at the busy border.

Staying there ran "the risk of the United States deciding to close the crossing for internal security reasons," said the letter signed by Tijuana migration director Enrique Lucero.

Mexico's migration institute did not respond to a request for comment.

For now, the Russians are staying put.

Mikhail Shliachkov, 35, seated on a cot under a parasol to take cover from the glaring sun, said he resolved to go to Mexico with his wife the day after the invasion, fearing he would be called up to fight close relatives in Ukraine.

"I don't want to kill my brothers, you know?" he said, showing a photo of his birth certificate that states his mother was born in Ukraine.

As the Russians wait, U.S. border officials have also turned away asylum seekers from Nigeria, Colombia, Honduras and Mexico, sparking complaints of unfair treatment.

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

LOCAL NEWS

Mexico's migration institute suspends operations in Tapachula after 'violent' incident

March 18 (Reuters) - Mexico's National Migration Institute (INM) said on Friday it has temporarily suspended operations in the city of Tapachula, in Chiapas, after some staff were injured in what it called a "violent" incident involving migrants.

Tapachula, a city on the border with Guatemala, has been the site of previous clashes between authorities and migrants who are waiting for papers to be able to freely travel through the country.

Report ad
The INM said some of its staff members were hurt in a "violent eruption" caused by "pseudo-leaders" among migrants. Some of the INM's facilities were also damaged, it said in a statement.

Operations were suspended until further notice because the safety of its property and staff could not be assured, the INM said.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of mostly Central American migrants flee violence and poverty but must wait for permits to cross Mexico and reach the United States, or responses to their asylum requests to stay in Mexico.

Russians hold some $3 billion in financial assets in the Bahamas, central bank says

NASSAU, March 19 (Reuters) - Financial institutions in the Bahamas have around $3 billion in assets whose owners are linked to Russia, the Caribbean nation's central bank said late on Friday.

The Bahamas on March 12 ordered a halt all transactions with Russian entities that have been put under sanction by Western nations. read more

The central bank found $420 million in deposits and $2.5 billion in custody or trust assets "with ultimate beneficial owners from or connected to Russia" in Bahamian financial institutions that are licensed to serve foreign clients.
Those figures apply only to the international banking and trust sector, which serve clients outside the country, and do not include any Russian assets that could be held in Bahamian banks that serve the local population, the central bank said.

It did not say what portion of those assets were held by Russians under sanction.

The Bahamas nation has vocally condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but appears to remain conflicted over how aggressively it can participate sanctions efforts without damaging its relatively small economy.

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Editor's Choice

Tanya McLean, aunt of Jacob Blake, reacts to the verdict in the trial of Kyle Rittenhouse, outside the Kenosha County Courthouse in Kenosha, N REUTERS/Evelyn Hockstein

A man holds a placard as he protests again the verdict in Kenosha, . REUTERS/Evelyn Hockstein

A woman stands behind a car with shattered glass near the scene of a shooting at the Boise Towne Square shopping mall in Boise, Idaho. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

Hannah Gittings, girlfriend of victim Anthony Huber, is embraced as she speaks to the media after the verdict, REUTERS/Evelyn Hockstein

Fishermen throw a bottle of beer during the traditional carp haul near the town of Blatna, Czech Republic. REUTERS/David W Cerny

Supporters of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange protest outside the Royal Courts of Justice in London, Britain. REUTERS/Henry Nicholls

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

BUSINESS

Coffee, Wine, And Wheat Varieties Are Among The Foods We Could Lose Forever

The Extinction Crisis That No One Is Talking About

Tractors harvest a monoculture of soybeans in Mato Grosso, Brazil. (Getty Images/iStockphoto)

Key Point

Supply chain challenges and inflation spikes in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic have now been joined by growing and documented concerns for the potential extinction of endangered foods and the lack of food choices along with the diversity of foods as well as the nutritional values they represent that are in serious danger of disappearing from the global marketplace. Scientific observers are now saying it is time to act and make efforts to bring diversity back into the food system while being motivated by the health of society.

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

Your morning coffee is in a perilous state. There are just two species of coffee plants on which the entire multibillion-dollar industry is based: One of them is considered poor-tasting, and the other, which you're likely familiar with, is threatened by climate change and a deadly fungal disease.

Thankfully, there's another kind of coffee out there, known as stenophylla. It has a higher heat tolerance, greater resistance to certain fungal pathogens, and it tastes great. There's just one problem: It's incredibly rare, and until recently, scientists believed it was extinct.

Stenophylla is just one of dozens of important foods that are threatened with extinction, according to Dan Saladino, a BBC journalist and author of the new book, "Eating to Extinction: The World's Rarest Foods and Why We Need to Save Them." While grocery stores may seem as abundant as ever, Saladino argues that the diversity of food is actually in decline. Of the hundreds of thousands of wheat varieties that farmers once cultivated, for example, only a handful are now farmed on a large scale, he told Vox.

As we grow and harvest fewer varieties of plants and animals, the foods you can buy in the grocery store may become less nutritious and flavorful, and — as the current state of coffee demonstrates — the global food system could become less resilient. That's why it's so crucial to lift up communities that are protecting foods from disappearing, Saladino told Vox in an interview about his new book.

The important conversation that followers was held between author Dan Saladino and Vox.com interviewer Benji Jones and pinpoints the food diversity challenges that face us all.

Grocery stores may be stocked, but the variety of food is in decline

Benji Jones

You write that a lot of foods, such as varieties of coffee and wheat, are going extinct. Yet when I walk into the grocery store it seems like there's more variety than ever.

Dan Saladino

Whether it's cotton candy grapes or certain varieties of avocado, there's a degree of uniformity. And while you'll see this abundance — consider bread, and the wheat it's made of — it's extremely narrow in terms of its genetics.

In this amazing place in the Arctic called Svalbard, there's a seed vault buried deep under the ice, down a tunnel, in which there are more than 200,000 different unique samples of wheat. That's the kind of diversity that's hidden from us. A farmer today in the UK might get a recommended list of wheat varieties to grow — dictated largely by the food industry and millers and bakers — of fewer than 10 kinds.

You can take all of the world's staple crops, including maize [also known as corn] and rice, and you'll see the same thing. In seed banks around the world, there are tens to hundreds of thousands of varieties, yet in the food system that we experience, it's an extremely small number.

Benji Jones

Why should the average grocery shopper care about losing these rare varieties of food?

Dan Saladino

Endangered foods give us options in a future with many challenges — feeding a growing population, reducing emissions, and finding fresh water, for example.

Take a type of maize tucked away in a mountain village in southern Mexico, very close to where maize was first domesticated thousands of years ago. Botanists arrived in the late 1970s and saw this 16-foot-tall stock of maize. It shouldn't have been growing there because the soil was so poor.

Not only was it so tall, but it also has these aerial roots that were dripping with mucus, like something out of a science fiction film. Just three years ago, a scientist figured out that the mucus is an interplay between sugars and microbes that's actually feeding the plant from the air. That hadn't been seen before in cereal crops.

A type of maize that grows in the Sierra Mixe region of Oaxaca, Mexico. It has aerial roots coated in mucus that help the plant pull nutrients out of the air. (Photo/Allen Van Deynze et. al./PLOS Biology)

Why should we care? If we understand how this plant works, could we potentially use it to reduce our use of fertilizer globally? We know there is a way in which some plants are feeding themselves. We need to give thanks to the Indigenous people who have looked after this maize for centuries, if not thousands of years.

Benji Jones

A wider variety of crops also makes our food system more resilient to threats like disease and climate change, right?

Dan Saladino

That's another really important lesson. I traveled to eastern Turkey to get as close as I could to the Fertile Crescent, where wheat was first domesticated. I found farmers who had saved a type of emmer wheat that had been growing for 8,000 to 9,000 years. It's been growing in high altitudes where it's damp.

If you put a modern wheat variety in that environment, fungal diseases would ruin the crop. And so what they have in Turkey is a precious genetic resource that has forms of resistance, such as to fungal pathogens.

A field of kavilca, or emmer, wheat. (Dan Saladino)

You can also find those principles of disease resilience among ancient varieties of rice and maize — really, in all of the crops. Over thousands of years, our ancestors created these adaptations through farming under different conditions.

What we've done since is create these incredibly high-performance plants that need specific conditions to grow, and a lot of inputs, like fertilizer. Each wheat or maize plant is almost a clone, whereas in traditional farming, there's a huge amount of genetic diversity in the field. If you get a bad summer or too much or too little rain, some of those traditional varieties are still going to bear grains because there is diversity within the crops.

You can breed out bitterness, but you might lose deliciousness

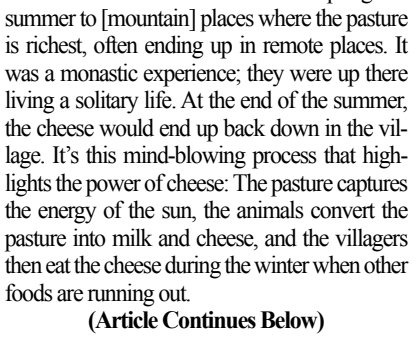
Benji Jones

Is there a flavor extinction happening as well?

Dan Saladino

Absolutely. I tell the story of a type of wild citrus from northern India called memang narang. It has a cultural, culinary, and medicinal function, but the striking thing is how bitter these fruits are. The people who live here place huge value on bitterness, a flavor that's disappearing from most of our palates. Fruit breeders, over centuries, have been ingenious at giving us something that we love: sweetness. They have bred out the bitterness.

When you realize that the bitter taste comes from compounds that help plants protect themselves from pests, then you understand why it might be beneficial to retain that flavor. We've taken the beneficial bitter compounds out, and we've cloaked plants in pesticides and other chemicals to protect them.



A type of rare coffee, Coffea stenophylla. (Getty Images)

Another example comes from coffee. We live in a world where we can enjoy a lot of different types of arabica coffee. There's robusta as well. But these are just two of more than a hundred different types of coffee around the world.

Historically, there were cultures in parts of Africa that had more distinctive types of coffee, including one called stenophylla that was prized in parts of East Africa up until the 1960s, when it pretty much went extinct because farming systems changed. It has greater disease resistance than arabica. And arabica is under pressure now because of climate change — it's an extremely delicate plant. Stenophylla offers the benefit of disease resistance, and it's an amazing-tasting coffee.

Coffee as we know it is in danger. Can we breed a better cup?

Benji Jones

Another example that helps explain the decline of flavor comes from a region of France, home to the Salers cow. It really shows the connection between biodiversity and flavor, right?

Dan Saladino

"Salers" is a place, a breed of cow, and a cheese. Farmers would take their cattle in the spring and summer to [mountain] places where the pasture is richest, often ending up in remote places. It was a monastic experience; they were up there living a solitary life. At the end of the summer, the cheese would end up back down in the village. It's this mind-blowing process that highlights the power of cheese: The pasture captures the energy of the sun, the animals convert the pasture into milk and cheese, and the villagers then eat the cheese during the winter when other foods are running out.

(Article Continues Below)

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

COMMUNITY

(Article Continues From Above)

Coffee, Wine, And Wheat Varieties Are Among The Foods We Could Lose Forever

The Extinction Crisis That No One Is Talking About

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

Dan Saladino

The remarkable thing is that the pasture is so rich in microbes that these farmers don't even need a starter culture to coagulate the milk and turn it into cheese. As soon as the milk hits these wooden barrels, it's inoculated with microbes. For a modern health inspector, it would be a nightmare to watch.

We've been talking about the endangered genetics of crops and endangered tastes. Here, we're talking about endangered microbes that are not only missing from the cheese making process, but also from our gut microbiomes.

A breed of cattle called Salers in the Cantal region of France. (Photo/Andia/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

Benji Jones

You also explain that when these cows have access to a wide diversity of plants in the pasture, their milk and cheese end up tasting richer. That's because different grasses have different types of defense chemicals called terpenes, which can translate to flavor in the milk.

Dan Saladino

Terpenes can be found in milk from rich pastures, but not in cheese made from cattle that have been fed on grains. We're only beginning to understand the connections between biodiversity and our food and our health and our flavors.

Benji Jones

You traveled the world sampling all of these foods with unique flavors. What were some that stood out?

Dan Saladino

Skerpikjøt is this food from the Faroe Islands. There's not enough sunlight or firewood there to produce salt to preserve food. People instead built these huts that have gaps that allow the sea air in. They raise sheep and hang the meat in these huts, which gets bathed by the salty air and slowly fermented and preserved. It doesn't look like food. It's covered in mold. It needs to be washed. It's almost as if this sheep meat is gently rotting away in these huts, but actually, the conditions are exactly right so it doesn't rot or become too funky. It becomes this wonderful preserved meat.

Benji Jones

You also have an incredible chapter about a type of wine in the country Georgia, which you explain is where some of the world's first — or the first — winemakers were practicing their craft.

Dan Saladino

Georgia is the most likely country in which grapes were domesticated and the first winemakers were practicing their craft. They have a technology that predates the barrel by thousands of years — the qvevri. These are terracotta vessels that you bury underground with whole branches of grapes with skin and pips [seeds] inside. Many people think France and Italy and Spain and California are great wine-producing regions. Here is a place where the relationship with wine just goes up another level. There is a reverence and spiritual dimension to wine drinking.

A workshop where Georgian qvevris are being made. (Photo/Dan Saladino)

Our relationship with food mirrors our relationship with nature

Benji Jones

In your book, you talk about how losing certain foods isn't just about losing resilience, flavor, and culture, but also about our changing relationship with nature. You explain that some groups, like the Hadza people of Tanzania, are deeply connected to their environment through food — and by losing certain foods, we may be losing these connections.

Dan Saladino

The Hadza story brilliantly sums that up. I followed some of these hunter-gatherers out within a landscape of baobab trees. In those trees, some of which are a thousand years old, you can find bees' nests and one of the greatest prizes the Hadza can find: honey. It's an extremely important food — and their favorite food — but it's hard for them to find the hives high up in the trees.

The Hadza whistle, and after a period of time, if they're lucky, a very humble-looking bird will fly down. The bird will start a "conversation" with the hunter-gatherers and lead them to a tree with honey. The bird knows where the honey is, whereas the hunter-gatherers have the fire and the smoke to get rid of the bees, which are a risk for the bird. The Hadza can go up, extract the honey, and then leave something behind for the birds.

An illustration of a greater honeyguide. (Photo/Brown Bear/ Windmill Books/Universal Images Group via Getty Images,)

Toward the end of the Hadza visit, we went to a mud and brick hut, and inside there were cans and cans of soda. This was a source of sugar and energy that could mean that they no longer use that skill to find honey within our lifetimes — something so fundamentally important to human history could disappear.

Benji Jones

Do we run the risk of glorifying some of these older cultures? Don't some of these groups want soda — or access to health care, or other benefits that come with Western or modern life?

Dan Saladino

There's story after story of another culture coming in and imposing its food and its farming systems and its values and its desires on these Indigenous food systems. My argument is that people should be given the choice. They should have access to health care, but that doesn't necessarily mean that their way of life should be fundamentally changed because they're buying into our system.

A man dries a rare, prized type of Venezuelan cacao called criollo. (Photo/ Dan Saladino)

How to save endangered foods

Benji Jones

There are clearly a lot of things that don't work with our food system. What gave you hope while reporting the book? What inspired you?

Dan Saladino

There's a network of people out there who are saving the diversity of foods. Before Covid, they gathered at a slow food event to bring their foods from around the world, and share stories about what they've saved and what threats they're facing. This solidarity is what gives me optimism.

In southwestern China, I met a farmer saving an extremely rare type of highly nutritious colored rice. He got out his phone and sold rice through WeChat to people in Beijing and Chengdu, some of the biggest cities in the world. Modern technology can actually connect us.

Benji Jones

The food industry is massive and largely run by just a small number of companies. How does one person help prevent these unique foods from going extinct?

Dan Saladino

It's important to understand what we mean by endangered foods and diversity. I think we should all choose our favorite foods and interrogate the diversity of that food. Explore cacao, coffee, or different types of cheeses. Then maybe develop a relationship with a cheesemaker and become a different kind of customer — somebody who's supporting a local farmer.

These levers do exist for governments to make a big, significant change. I also think we have the most selfish reasons to embrace diversity — our own health. We know what's happening in many parts of the world, in terms of type 2 diabetes, cancers, and other diseases that have a food dimension. Perhaps we will be motivated by health to try and bring diversity back into the food system. The science says we need to. (Courtesy vox.com)