

BOOK REVIEW

Plants of Dhofar; The Southern Region of Oman: Traditional, Economic and Medicinal Uses. Anthony G. Miller and Miranda Morris. Muscat, Sultanate of Oman: The Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment, Diwan of Royal Court Sultanate of Oman (P.O. Box 246), 1988. Pp. xxvii, 361, plates, endpaper maps, appendices, bibliography, index. £35.00.

In the Preface to this important work, Professor Richard Evans Schultes outlines three aspects of conservation "most urgently in need of wide and constructive attention: one, the protection of plant species in danger of extinction; two, the salvaging of the knowledge about plants and their properties which is in the hands of fast disappearing cultures; and three, the domestication of new crop plants or, in broader terms, the conservation of germ plasm of economically promising species" (p. ix). Since the second—the salvaging of disappearing folk knowledge of plants—often provides invaluable ammunition in the fights for protection and development of promising plants, it is especially important that books such as the one under review be published and widely disseminated.

Fortunately, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, Sultan of Oman, shares these views. Citing (p. vi) "a great store of knowledge about medicinal and economic uses for a wide range of our wild plants" still held by the people of Oman, he has long sponsored efforts "to record as much as possible of this useful knowledge and to preserve the plants upon which it is based, before either or both disappear," and "to direct the development of our natural resources towards their rational use for raising the quality of life and education of our people."

Anthony G. Miller, of the Royal Botanic Garden at Edinburgh, provides a botanical introduction (pp. xi-xvii), describing the geology, topography, climate, vegetation zones, and phytogeography of Oman. While systematic plant collecting began there in 1894, extensive surveys were conducted in the late 1970s, and the present work is largely the result of those.

Miranda Morris, trained in Arabic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (London), contributes a specialist introduction (pp. xviii-xxv). On the basis of her long-term research in the languages and ethnography of Oman, she selected the plants to be included on the basis of their nutritional or medicinal significance, their importance as fodder, and some on more general grounds. Her discussion of Jibbali and Dhofari plant names (also listed in an appendix) will interest ethnosystematists given the apparently low frequency of binomials. General discussions of agriculture, leatherworking, and traditional medicine serve as a useful context for the more specific information given for each plant.

The heart of the book, of course, is a presentation of the plants themselves (pp. 1-334). Nearly 150 species (out of a total of over 750 spp. in Dhofar, and 1,100 in Oman as a whole), mainly from the annual monsoon rainfall zone, are included in a standardized format: alphabetically by family, a page of text faces a full-page color plate (seemingly based on watercolor paintings and sketches, superbly executed by Susanna Stuart-Smith). Somewhat inconveniently, in many instances the text runs to more than a page and, to retain the format, is resumed much later in the book (e.g., pp. 20 and 296). Varying detail is provided for the plants but for each a technical botanical description is given along with a more narrative description, including its names, uses, and (sometimes) references to uses elsewhere in the world. The plates—some of which are the first illustrations ever to be published of particular species—are not glossy, but the paintings (most of which were done from living material) are clear. Many are lifesize, and usually the whole plant is depicted as well as flowering parts, fruits, seeds, etc.

Appended material (pp. 335-361) includes a checklist of plants, Jibbali and Dhofari plant names, a glossary of botanical terms, a glossary of specialist terms, a select bibliography, and an index.

While it would have been useful to include photographs of at least some of the plants in their use contexts, the work as a whole is magnificent and an invaluable contribution towards the goals articulated by Schultes and the project's royal sponsor. The urgency of such endeavors is underscored by the fact that "(the) past tense is usually used throughout the text, partly for the sake of consistency, but partly also because this reflects present-day realities" (p. xxvi) in Oman, where expertise still exists, but its deployment is rapidly giving way in the face of modern developments. We all stand warned.

Terence E. Hays
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