

BOOK REVIEW

Thompson Ethnobotany: Knowledge and Usage of Plants by the Thompson Indians of British Columbia. Nancy J. Turner, Laurence C. Thompson, M. Terry Thompson, and Annie Z. York. 1990. Memoir No. 3, Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, B.C., Canada. 335 pp., illustrations, five appendices, index. \$15.00 Canadian.

Thompson Ethnobotany is perhaps the most comprehensive ethnobotanical ethnography for native North America and the most detailed account of the ethnobotanical knowledge of any non-agricultural people. It is the result of a collaboration of more than 20 years among the authors, Nancy Turner, a botanist of outstanding anthropological sensitivity, Laurence and Terry Thompson, leading Salishan linguists, and Annie York, born in 1904, a native speaker of Thompson Salish, and a life-long resident of the Thompson homeland. To this winning combination must be added an additional collaborator, James Teit (mentored by Franz Boas), whose pioneering Thompson ethnobotanical research (conducted 1896–1918), enhance the time depth of this study by a full 90 years. It is significant to note, however, that only some 20 species are no longer recognized by contemporary elders.

The core of this book is the “Inventory of Plants Species Named and/or Used by the Thompsons,” 224 pages annotating (and often illustrating with clear black and white photos) nearly 400 species of plants. These entries are listed alphabetically by scientific name within each major grouping, from algae and fungi through the flowering plants. Each entry includes Latin species and genus name, authority (with major synonyms), then a list of Thompson Salish Terms recorded for that species, with the initials of specific informants noted. Terms are interpreted linguistically and compared to other published versions of the native names. An encyclopedic summary of ethnobiological data follows. While a few entries—mostly for introduced plants—are brief (even plants that are not named are noted if they were recognized), other entries run to several pages, as for western red cedar, Douglas fir, yellow-avalanche lily, serviceberry, and Indian hemp.

The cultural significance of plants is broadly conceived, but organized in standard fashion under such headings as foods (120+ species), materials (115+ species) and medicines (200+ species). Species used as food are subgrouped as

“roots;” green vegetables; fruits, nuts, and seeds; “innerbark;” mushrooms, and fungi; canned or emergency food; beverages; chews; and flavorings and confections. The large number of plant species used as food belies the biased view of Pacific Northwest economies as essentially based on the fisheries. However, the authors do not attempt to estimate the relative nutritional contribution of various categories of food to traditional Thompson diets. The cultural role of plant foods is further clarified by summaries of methods of harvest, preservation, cooking and serving, with consideration of their contemporary role. The harvest and preparation plants used for wooden implements, for fuel, for their fibers and bark, for “dyes, stains, paints, and preservative,” for resin or pitch, and as scents and/or cleaning agents are also summarized. Medicinal plants are grouped according to general categories of illness for which they are employed. Mode of application and dosage are carefully noted whenever possible and appropriate cautions are offered when potentially harmful plants are involved. Ecological and mythological associations are systematically noted. In sum, Turner *et al.* have left no stone unturned.

Turner’s longstanding interest in contributing to the comparative analysis of universals of classification and nomenclature as proposed by Brent Berlin is well known to readers of this journal. However, the results of Turner’s meticulous analyses of the folk botanical classification systems of Thompson and neighboring languages are only briefly summarized here, as they have been published elsewhere.

Thompson Ethnobotany is a model for the conduct of ethnobotanical ethnography among what, for want to a better term, we might call “heavily colonized” indigenous peoples, i.e., those whose aboriginal ecological adaptations have been so radically altered by the course of colonial history that the memories of living elders are a precious and fragile resource. Turner, Thompson, Thompson and York have saved here an impressive fragment of Thompson Indian traditional environmental understanding for the edification of future generations.

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