

BOOK REVIEW

Islands, Plants, and Polynesians: An Introduction to Polynesian Ethnobotany.

Paul Alan Cox and Sandra Anne Banack (editors). Portland, Oregon: Dioscorides Press, 1991. Pp. 240, 16 photos. \$34.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-931146-18-6.

Islands, Plants and Polynesians is a collection of papers originally given at a symposium entitled "Plants and Man in Polynesia" in Laie, Hawaii, in December 1988. The result is a beautifully produced book containing a wealth of information about Polynesian ethnobotany. Throughout, one appreciates the ingenuity the Polynesians have displayed in adapting to their island environments. Especially striking are the influences of their remarkable sea voyages in shaping the botanical and cultural landscapes of this area.

Polynesia is roughly defined as the area within a triangle circumscribed by Hawaii, Easter Island, and New Zealand. Emphasis is placed upon, but not limited to, the tropical island ecosystems of this region. The volume begins with Raymond Fosberg's introduction to Polynesian plant environments, in which he describes their physical characteristics and reconstructs pre-Polynesian, pre-European, and post-European landscapes and biota. Sandra Anne Banack follows with an account of the plant materials used in Polynesian voyaging, from boat construction to ceremonial offerings. Patterns of Polynesian plant introductions before or shortly after European contact are detailed by Arthur Whistler, who documents 72 plant species intentionally introduced by aboriginal Polynesians and another 12 which were possibly introduced intentionally. Douglas Yen addresses the origins of Polynesian cultivars and agricultural systems, discussing the influences of Southeast Asia and New Guinea on Polynesian agricultural species and practices. Karl Rensch provides an example of the use of linguistic evidence in deducing plant origins and migrations, focusing specifically on the vernacular names for the sweet potato. Patrick Kirch characterizes aboriginal Polynesian agricultural systems and describes their evolution and modification through time. The Polynesian uses of seaweeds are detailed by Isabella Abbott. Paul Cox provides an insightful discussion of Polynesian herbal medicine, touching not only on some important plant species utilized, but examining Polynesian theories of disease causation, the role of healers in Polynesian society, and the evidence for and against the autochthonous origins of Polynesian herbalism. The ethnobotany of Kava (*Piper methysticum*), an inebriant used throughout Polynesia, is discussed in detail by Vincent Lebot. Finally, Diane Ragone gives an account of the distribution, uses, and preservation methods for breadfruit (*Artocarpus altilis*) in the south Pacific.

There is much here to interest both the botanist and anthropologist. Scientific names as well as local names are used accurately throughout the text along with the plant family, a welcome practice that facilitates accurate identification and comparison of botanical entities. An index to scientific names and Polynesian words is given. The book is handsomely produced, reasonably priced, and a pleasure to read. I found very few errors. Many of the papers emphasize the

need to document the ethnobotanical lore of Polynesia before both the plants and the knowledge of how to use them are irrevocably lost. This book is an outstanding contribution that adds greatly to our knowledge of Polynesian plants and peoples, and points the way toward new directions for study in Polynesian ethnobotany.

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