BOOK REVIEW


As Ballena Press Anthropological Paper No. 38, this small book includes Delfina Cuero's autobiography, which was published originally in 1968, plus such new material as an account of her life from 1968 to 1972, a partial listing of her ethnobotanical contributions, two photographs, and a map of southwestern California and adjacent Baja California. Delfina Cuero was a Diegueño Indian, or Kumeyaay, who was born about 1900 and lived in San Diego County and nearby northern Baja California Norte until her death in 1972. Her perspective on the use of and change in the landscape and natural resources of the area as well as the data on specific plants are the two distinct contributions of major interest to ethnobotanists.

The importance of the collection, consumption and storage of plants and ani-
mals to the survival of non-reservation Indians before and during the accultura-
tion period is clearly stated. The effect of cultural ignorance and violation of legal
agreements on her people, as documented by Delfina Cuero’s personal experi-
ences, is dramatically presented by such examples as the division of hunting and
gathering territories by land developers and two countries, and the negative
impact of cessation of female initiation ceremonies on such activities as traditional
plant use and human reproduction. The correlation is evident between cultural
disintegration and habitat loss.

The 70 taxa listed at the end of the book are part of a larger work on the ethno-
botany of Kumeyaay which is being prepared by Dr. Shipek. This particular set of
data originated solely from Delfina Cuero during separate visits to Mission Bay
Salt Marsh Reserve and Torrey Pines State Park in 1966 and 1968, respectively,
both in coastal southern California. It is included because she was the only person
who provided such information and it is a testimony to her contribution. Most of
the entries have basic information but four plants have no use listed and 15 are
without native names.

The utility of the plants is illustrated by 48 species with a single use and 18
with multiple uses. The ethnocentric categories are broken down as follows: medi-
cine 40, food 28, soap 4, beverage 4, personal adornment 2, utilitarian 2, flavoring 2,
smoking substance 1, thirst reliever 1, animal food 1, fiber 1, and construction
material 1. Unfortunately, no voucher specimens were obtained. Plant identifica-
tion was made in the field using P.A. Munz’ A Flora of Southern California (1974)
although this book was published after the field trips. In a few cases, the tax-
onomic nomenclature of the ethnobotanical list does not correspond to that in the
flora. At least nine plants are introduced, which may represent resource experi-
mentation as part of acculturation (e.g., *Brassica nigra* which is known by the
Kumeyaay generic name for “edible greens” and *Avena fatua* which replaced an
unidentified semi-domesticated grain). The lack of voucher specimens and the
hiatus between Delfina Cuero’s use of certain plants as a young woman and her
reacquaintance with them many years later may be of concern to researchers who
are interested in the reliability of this information. None-the-less Florence Con-
nolly Shipek and her collaborators, Mrs. Rosalie Pinto Robertson, Dr. Margaret
Langdon, and Mrs. Elisabeth C. Norland, are to be congratulated on bringing to
the ethnobotanical community a tantalizing ethnobotanical compilation with a
strong personal background of the Kumeyaay collaborator. Most of all, we have a
special appreciation of Delfina Cuero for having shared her life and ethno-
botanical experiences with us. The historical perspective in this book puts into
painful perspective the destruction of a people, their knowledge and their plants.

LITERATURE CITED

MUNZ, P.A. 1974. A Flora of Southern Cal-
ifornia. University of California Press,
Berkeley.

Robert Bye
Jardín Botánico, Instituto de Biología
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
04510 México, DF, MEXICO