

The Ethnobotany of Tonga: The Plants, Their Tongan Names, and Their Uses.
W.A. Whistler. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1991. Pp. 155. \$49.95 (paper-bound). ISBN 0-930897-57-9.

This book is a catalogue of the numerous plants recorded by Whistler during several field trips to Tonga between 1987 and 1990. Whistler presents his work as an attempt to salvage traditional Tongan knowledge of local plants in the face of increasing reliance on Western manufactured goods. He also offers his work as a foundation for additional research by ethnobotanists and anthropologists into traditional plant uses. Although the resulting book is a fairly raw presentation of the information Whistler collected during his surveys, this volume is nonetheless a useful resource for those with a specific interest in human-environmental relationships in Polynesia. This book documents not only the subsistence and material uses of plants, but also medicinal and ornamental plant uses. The book also casts light on some unintended ecological consequences of human disturbance by noting a large number of weeds that grow on the islands. In addition, Whistler's work provides insights into Tongan folk knowledge and beliefs surrounding plants.

Whistler begins the book with five extremely short introductory sections. The first section gives a "bare-bones" (less than three pages) introduction to the Tongan islands, their culture, and their history. An even shorter chapter reviews the flora of the islands and lists previous botanical surveys done in Tonga. Next is an explanation of his methodology for the project, which involved field interviews with Tongan informants and collecting voucher specimens. The following section is a

short introduction to the Tongan language, including a few notes on its relationship to other Polynesian languages and some comments on how the language is rendered orthographically. The fifth of these introductory chapters discusses the different uses of the plants Whistler has recorded and the different categories he used to classify the plants during his surveys. Whistler divided his collections into “. . . food plants, material plants, dye plants, fish poisons, ornamentals, medicinals, and ‘other’” (p. 14).

The lion's share of the book is given over to the list of plants. The plant names—about 620 of them in all—are alphabetized by their Tongan names. Entries also note the island where the specimen was taken, the plant's habitat, native uses of the plant, and its origin. Also, Whistler thoughtfully provides an index of the plants' scientific names in the back of the book. Several appendices list plants that were noted in earlier botanical articles which Whistler was unable to verify in his own study, so that the substance of all major previous works is captured in this volume.

Obviously, this book is not an effort to integrate Tongan ethnobotanical data into any larger cultural or historical framework. Rather, Whistler seeks to provide a sourcebook on Tongan plant usage for other researchers. Whistler deserves congratulations for the service he has rendered to anthropologists who wish to better understand the Tongans' relationship with their environment.

However, there are some aspects of this book's presentation that could have been better. For instance, readers unfamiliar with botany will find the entries littered with arcane notes and abbreviations. This book would be more accessible to a wider audience if Whistler had taken the time to explain his entries more fully. Otherwise, the only fault I can find with the book is the omission of a Bellwood reference from the bibliography.

All in all, *The Ethnobotany of Tonga* will be a useful addition to the resources of anthropologists and archaeologists interested in Polynesia in general and Tonga in particular, although the book's price may intimidate some potential readers. The information in this volume provides insights into the role of local plants in many aspects of Tongan daily life. This book will appeal to a fairly narrow band of researchers, but they should be pleased with *The Ethnobotany of Tonga*.

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