

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Nch'i-Wana*, "The Big River": Mid-Columbia Indians and their Land. Eugene Hunn with James Selam and Family. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990. Pp. 390. ISBN: 0-295-96851-6. \$30.00 (cloth).

We immigrants, who call ourselves "natives" after one paltry generation on the land, can scarcely fathom what it means to the Indian to walk on a land in which a hundred generations of ancestors have been buried.

So writes Eugene Hunn, his words reflecting the same spirit of humility and respect that has long guided traditional Native American peoples in their relationships to the natural world. In this study, Hunn and his Plateau Indian collaborators richly detail the interchange between a human community and its environment. The people are contemporary Sahaptin speakers, living in or near the Yakima, Umatilla, and Warm Springs reservations of Washington and Oregon. What emerges in this book is a body of ancient knowledge and a portrayal of the lifeway this knowledge has long sustained, a lifeway quietly persisting within earshot of highway America.

For ethnobiologists, *Nch'i-Wana* is a lavish feast of information, carefully researched and skillfully presented. Chapter topics include: regional history from first contact through 1987; language and linguistics; subsistence ecology and seasonal round; knowledge and uses of animal and plant resources; ecological perspectives on social organization; traditional and modern religion; and contemporary land-related political issues. Along with the descriptive material are theoretical discussions of interest to ecological anthropologists on topics such as sexual division of labor and the relationships between environment and political organization. Attentive to his lay readers, Hunn also provides clearly written background information, along with lively explanations of anthropological approaches and principles.

The book is very well produced, with fine graphics and plentiful illustrations. The appendices are a study in themselves, including a list of over four hundred categories of animals and plants named by Sahaptin speakers. For each of these taxa, states Hunn in the book's Introduction, "one could write a long, fascinating, and intricate story." The main text provides abundant evidence for the truth of this statement and excites interest in Hunn's promise of more writings to come.

Underlying this work is a collaboration that spanned thirteen years at publication and continues as a "life-long, if part-time occupation" for Eugene Hunn and his instructor James Selam. The partnership includes Selam's critical readings of the manuscript, and Hunn's struggles to meet his responsibilities to a diverse audience that includes both the Native American and academic communities, as well as naturalists, students, and general readers interested in the topic or region.

Anyone experienced with ethnographic research will recognize the commitment to high standards in every aspect of this study. Of particular importance is

Hunn's ethically-founded relationship to his Native consultants and their community, his long term dedication to recording their traditions, and his efforts to assure accuracy in every written detail.

As a passionate devotee of descriptive ethnography, I found three chapters especially fascinating: the overview of subsistence ecology, the marvelously detailed compendium of plant and animal resources, and the discussion of Plateau Indian religious beliefs. Together, these chapters comprise an alternate guidebook to mid-Columbia River natural history.

The book contains hundreds of delightful tidbits like this one: Raven's voices often bring portentous messages, but crows, "though talkative, rarely say anything of significance." There are items to delight the folk taxonomist: For example, Sahaptin speakers distinguish two varieties of *Lomatium canbyi* not so much by their extremely subtle visual characteristics as by their differences in taste, one being used for savory root cakes and the other fit only to be eaten by "ground hogs." And there are insights like the following about Plateau subsistence ecology: In this environment, fiber plants were as important as food plants, because survival depended upon the ability to carry preserved edibles over long distances.

Eugene Hunn deserves a special accolade for the attention he has given to writing; his descriptions of mid-Columbia life are polished, fluid, and evocative. Woven through the text are stories, some told by his collaborators or gleaned from the literature, some drawn from the ethnographer's own experience. This makes the work engaging and readable, while also giving it an organic quality not present when the information is wholly dissected and restructured. Hunn takes his readers in pickup trucks to subsistence sites along remote country roads, up dry hillsides to gather plants and listen to the women tell stories, into cool streambeds to catch shiners on hooks baited with caddisfly larva. These recountings breathe life into the landscape, the people, and the culture that has evolved through their conjunction.

Taken as a whole, the book creates a sense for the Plateau Indians' active, participating membership in a community of natural beings, all of them imbued with spiritual power and accorded the status of persons. "The plants and animals, birds, fish, and insects are all named, familiar partners in the enterprise of survival." The moral imperatives that exist among members of human society are extended to the entire ecosystem. Hunn emphasizes his respect for this worldview: "I see in animism . . . a strange but powerfully consistent moral vision that makes us take our place beside those other living creatures whose futures are joined with ours. Such a moral vision seems altogether appropriate for a hunting-gathering people and embodies a wisdom we should seriously consider."

If I understand correctly, Hunn is suggesting the ethical and religious system that binds Plateau Indians to their natural surroundings may be more than simply interesting. The long-tested principles underlying this system could also be *important*, as we seek means to rectify the imbalances between industrial cultures and the world environment. With people from a wide range of disciplines plumbing the anthropological literature for insights on human-environmental relationships, ethnobiology is taking on a significance pioneer researchers might never have imagined. There is perhaps less need to invent a "new" environmental ethic than to rediscover an old one.

Recognizing the universality of human wisdom is among the first principles of anthropology and is surely the discipline's greatest promise. Eugene Hunn writes: "I can see myself reflected in the faces of these Indian people. . . . The mid-Columbia Indians are our long-lost brothers and sisters. Too bad that we for too long mistook them for strangers." But we still have the chance to correct our error, as this book demonstrates. Among its major achievements is the deep sense of empathy and shared purpose—the fundamental convergence of humanness—between the anthropologist Eugene Hunn and the Plateau Indian elders who have taken him into this apprenticeship.

In ethnobiology, the doors are opening on yet another promise. Studies of traditional peoples bring us in touch with an ancient and profound wisdom, that humans and nature are not separate but comprise one vast, encompassing community. This view, which appears to have guided Native American peoples during the long passage of millennia, is meticulously explored in *Nch'i-Wana*. Congratulations to Eugene Hunn, James Selam, and the other Plateau Indian people who made the book possible.

Richard Nelson  
Affiliate Professor of Anthropology  
University of Alaska  
Fairbanks, Alaska 99701