

**Ethnobotany: A Reader.** Edited by Paul Minnis. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman. 2000. \$18.95 (paper). ISBN 0-806-13180-2.

Edited by Paul Minnis and intended as a review of important works in ethnobotany, this book aims to give the reader a broad impression of what the discipline encompasses. Designed as a reader to accompany textbooks for upper division coursework, the fourteen chapters in this volume come from articles previously found in the *Journal of Ethnobiology*. The editor highlights contemporary studies in ethnobotany to acquaint the readers with current methods and findings in the field. To this end, the book is organized into four sections, ethnoecology, folk classification, food and medicines, and agriculture, each with a short introduction.

In the first section, ethnoecology is introduced in three chapters as the study of human perceptions and management of ecological phenomena, a discipline with roots in human ecology and cultural ecology. A particularly strong theme in the chapters by Janis Alcorn, Gary Nabhan, and Kat Anderson is the concept of adaptive management. In each of these studies ecological perturbations of plant environments are driven by human needs, but the outcomes for ecological communities as a whole are generally positive. In the language groups studied, new resource use patterns lead to greater richness in biological system diversity at the level of both plants and other organisms, such as birds and mammals.

The folk classification section focuses on the ways that people in different language groups construct vocabularies related to plants, with particular emphasis on critiquing or adding to the approaches of Brent Berlin. In the introduction Cecil Brown presents Berlin's most important ideas, folk classification as basically an *intellectual* exercise of organizing plants into series of hierarchical categories in the Linnean tradition. In the following two chapters, Brian Morris and Nancy Turner question the premise of intellectual rather than utilitarian motivation for the naming of plants in their respective studies of the Chewa in Malawi and Salish language groups. Eugene Hunn and David French find that Sahaptin hunter-gatherers do not organize their plant vocabulary into hierarchical series but coordinate organism names into focused groups or peripherally to similar organisms.

The longest section of the book relates to food and medicines and focuses on human interactions with wild plants. Much ethnobotanical literature is oriented to the study of plants as products that can be used as commodities, for example in the pharmaceutical industry. Contrarily for this book, the authors are more interested in studying the human-plant relationship to illuminate questions of conservation. Paul Minnis looks at famine foods in the desert borderlands between the United States and Mexico and how ethnic conceptions of these plants change as new foods are adopted. Robert Bye examines the ethnoecology of maintaining early-succession plant communities for the production of edible wild greens among the Tarahumara Indians. Eugene Hunn critiques representations in Murdoch's 1967 *Ethnographic Atlas* by presenting examples of female plant-gathering activities in the Columbia Plateau area. Jan Timbrook and Robert Voeks examine the dynamic nature of human interaction with medicinal plants. Timbrook notes how certain plants move into or out of favor with Chumash people as a

result of active cultural exchange with other language groups, and Voeks describes how the African diaspora into Brazil resulted in the use of Yoruba religious deities to inform the medicinal uses of local flora.

The agriculture section deals with the ethnoecology of plant modification and domestication. Gary Nabhan shows how plant domestication is an ongoing process among several aboriginal tribes in the southwestern United States. The maintenance of potato diversity in Peruvian highlands in the face of agricultural modernization leads Stephen Brush to conclude that we cannot conceptualize the Green Revolution simply as the replacement of pre-existing agricultural diversity with new domesticated varieties. George Estabrook employs the concept of invisible technology to explain why fuel-wood choices are specific to certain tasks in central Portugal.

The main criticism of this book stems from its relatively narrow geographic focus. Of the fourteen chapters in the book, ten relate to North American language groups and only two treat groups outside of the Americas. This is unfortunate given the detailed and important coverage in the ethnobotanical literature of diverse groups in Africa, Australia, and Asia. The absence of any discussion on the medicinal knowledge of China is a particularly glaring omission in the section on food and medicines.

The strength of this volume lies in its explicit treatment of hybridized ethnobotanical systems in situations where western influences lead to profound changes in the ways that humans interact with the botanical environment. Ethnic vocabularies and interactions with the plant world are not perceived as static, but as evolving and changing with the needs and experiences of the groups involved in their creation. This approach is useful in conceptualizing how human perceptions of plant resources are changing, and in turn how conservation might best be realized.

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