

# ETHNOBIOTICA

Darrell Addison Posey

1947-2001

Darrell Posey, 53, who had a celebrated career as ethnobiologist, anthropologist, activist, and specialist on Amazonia, died at Oxford, England on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2001 from inoperable brain tumors that had been diagnosed a few months before. Posey probably will be most remembered for his research on Kayapó Indian resource management and environmental knowledge together with his notable activism in defending the Kayapó and other peoples against the Xingu Hydroelectric Project of the late 1980s. On both academic and political fronts, Posey received strong support from many loyal colleagues and friends as well as fierce opposition from assorted detractors and enemies. A charismatic figure, Posey seemed to thrive at the center of controversy. It must be that his personal drive and many friendships weighed more heavily in the end than the ardor and dedication of his adversaries and his disappointments in life. Other than his academic contribution to ethnobiology, Posey had attended the second meeting of the Society of Ethnobiology as well as many meetings after that and was a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Ethnobiology* since the founding of the journal with volume 1, number 1 in May 1981 until his death.

Born and raised in Henderson County, Kentucky, Posey never lost the midland accent characteristic of that region. He earned the B.S. in entomology at Louisiana State University in 1970, the M.A. in geography and anthropology at Louisiana State University in 1974, and the Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Georgia in 1979. Posey was an interdisciplinary scholar long before the explosion of interdisciplinary programs in universities and research institutes in the 1980s and 1990s. He was also a prolific writer. In terms of his published output to date, Posey authored or co-authored three books, edited or co-edited four books, wrote 154 articles and chapters, and produced 22 book reviews, some of which were reprinted in one form or another. He directed two museum exhibits on Kayapó resource management and compiled the catalogues that accompanied them. He was also involved in the production of fifteen documentary films and videos, mainly on Kayapó ethnobiology and resource management. At the time of his death, Posey had two authored books and three edited books in press.

Among the numerous awards Posey received for his work and activism were the "Chico Mendes Award" for Extraordinary Courage in the Defense of Nature, given by the International Sierra Club in 1989 and the United Nations "Global 500 Award" for Outstanding Achievement in Service to the Environment, bestowed on him by the U.N. Environmental Programme in 1993. At the time of his death, he was coordinator of ECOS (Ethnoecology: The Ecological and Social Dimensions of Well-Being) at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Oxford. He also held other positions at Mansfield College, Oxford and the Federal University of Maranhão, Brazil. He was elected Fellow of the prestigious Linnean Society of London in 1999 and he maintained professional affiliations with Linacre College (Oxford), St. Anthony's College (Oxford), the Institute of Ethnobiology of the Amazon (which he had founded at Belém, Brazil), and the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. He held numerous advisory and editorial positions with various organizations, including the Society of Ethnobiology, the International Society of Ethnobiology, the Global Environment Facility, and the Indigenous Peoples Media Center.

Posey rather single-handedly founded the ethnobiological study of Amazonia and its peoples. Already well-known as an original researcher on Kayapó folk entomology (among other findings, his research in this area showed that the Kayapó recognized more species of wasps than Western taxonomy in regard to the Kayapó area, and that, indeed, one of the

species so recognized was new to science) and native resource management, having published his research in numerous peer-reviewed journals, Posey in 1988 found himself at the center of a professional and political crisis that would catapult him eventually to global renown. In 1987, while serving as Director of the Ethnobiology Program at the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi in Belém, Brazil, he was asked by the then Director of that museum, Dr. Guilherme de La Penha, to undertake an environmental and social impact study of indigenous populations in the area of influence of the Xingu Hydroelectric Project, with funding for the study to be provided by Eletronorte, a state-run electrical power company. Posey later said he believed he could mitigate the effects on native peoples of the dam project, then in the late stages of planning, by working against it from the inside. The dam project itself, once completed on the lower Xingu River, would flood a large area of indigenous lands and reserves, including part of the lands pertaining to the Kayapó of the village of Gorotire, which is where Posey had carried out most of his ethnobiological research since the time of his dissertation fieldwork and where he had many friends. By early 1988, Posey realized that his work from within would come to naught; he called it an "aborted effort." Later that year, he traveled with two Kayapó Indian leaders to Washington, D.C. in order to denounce the dam project in the offices of the President of the World Bank, who was then intending to disburse half a billion dollars in loans to Brazil in order to finance that project. As a result of this visit, and of the negative publicity that attended it, the World Bank soon suspended payment of the funds needed to drive the dam project forward. (In spite of Posey's efforts, the dam project has never been removed from national energy plans in Brazil).

Upon his return to Brazil, Posey and the two Kayapó leaders were arrested and fingerprinted on charges of harming the reputation abroad of Brazil. Soon released and awaiting trial on the charges, and also warned by the United States Embassy in Brasília that his life was now in danger, Posey continued with plans to host the First International Congress of Ethnobiology, which was held in July, 1988, at Belém, Brazil. The congress included hundreds of scholars from thirty-five countries and proved to be a resounding success, in spite of the presence of undercover federal intelligence agents, who mingled with the crowd. The Declaration of Belém, which called for protection of native knowledge, use, and management of biological resources as well as human rights of native peoples, was one of the results of this congress, largely thanks to Posey's efforts. While Posey was enjoying widespread endorsement for his activism by many colleagues in the international arena, the charges against him and the two Kayapó leaders were quietly dropped.

Posey lived mostly in Germany during 1989-91 as a Humboldt Fellow; he also founded INEA (Institute of Ethnobiology of the Amazon), an NGO headquartered in Belém. He eventually vacated his research position at the Museu Goeldi and became Senior Associate Fellow at Oxford in 1992, where he remained in one capacity or another until his death. Having confronted the Brazilian federal machinery over the Xingu Hydroelectric Project in 1988 (and it must be said in fairness that some of Posey's supporters were Brazilian federal and state officials who themselves shared sympathy for his cause), Posey became Special Advisor to the Brazilian Special Secretary on Internal Affairs and Indigenous Peoples during 1992. In that same year, he was Convenor and President of the Earth Parliament at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

From about that time on, Posey's work was primarily aimed at promoting the intellectual property rights (IPR) of native peoples while simultaneously opposing the threats to these rights that he perceived to be emanating from international pharmaceutical and other commercial interests. In 1992, Eugene Parker, who had been one of Posey's collaborators, published a scathing review of Posey's work with the Kayapó, calling into question, in

particular, Posey's findings with regard to Kayapó management and fostering of the forest islands that dot their otherwise well-drained, savanna landscape. Posey had claimed in various publications that these forest islands were basically anthropogenic. Parker argued, essentially, that the forest islands were naturally occurring phenomena and that Posey's methods in determining them to be otherwise were flawed and sloppy. The debate over the validity of Posey's data was reminiscent of the Redfield/Lewis and Mead/Freeman controversies from earlier generations of anthropology. Posey replied in the *American Anthropologist* that since Parker did not conduct his interviews in the Kayapó language, he would not have found evidence necessary to negate Posey's conclusions about the efficacy of native knowledge in remaking the landscape under question. Parker then supplied a rejoinder in the same journal, reiterating what he had asserted to be questionable science on Posey's part. Posey responded, in his defense, one more time to this critique in a chapter published in W. Balée (ed.), *Advances in Historical Ecology* (1998). It seems likely that this controversy between Parker and Posey will remain unsettled until further, scientifically sound archaeological and ethnolinguistic research is carried out to determine the origins and development of forest islands in the *cerrado* country of the Gorotire Kayapó.

Regardless of this inflammatory exchange in the pages of the *American Anthropologist*, Posey by 1992 was devoting much more of his time to IPR. Indeed, he published three major books on that subject in 1996 (D.A. Posey and G. Dutfield, *Beyond Intellectual Property*; D.A. Posey, *Traditional Resource Rights*; and D.A. Posey and G. Dutfield, *Indigenous Peoples and Sustainability*), all of which were favorably reviewed. At the very end of his life, Posey's unpublished work reflected a return to his original research on the Kayapó and in ethnobiology. The two books authored by Posey and still in press at the time of his death are entitled *Ethnobiology of the Kayapó Indians of Brazil* and *Ethnobiology: Principles and Practices*.

A full account of Darrell Posey and the influence he exercised on ethnobiology, Kayapó studies, native resource management, and activism for native land rights and IPR remains to be written. For those who knew him in life, Darrell Posey will be remembered for his courage in the face of danger; his loyalty as a friend and colleague; his charismatic effect on researchers, young and old, around the globe; and his folksy, Kentucky wit and humor that never seemed to fail him, even in his darkest trials. He will be missed.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.