

# ETHNOBIOTICA

Today's local sporting event of note leads me, in roundabout fashion, to ask some questions that may be relevant to readers. It's early June 2001, and as I write this column, Tulane's and LSU's baseball teams are about to play the decisive game in their best-of-three, playoff-bound, super regional series. Zephyrs Stadium in nearby Harahan is sold out, and therefore the game will be broadcast on local cable in addition to the usual media outlets, such as radio and print media. The flow of knowledge from the actual innings and final result will be essentially unimpeded for all in Southeast Louisiana who care to listen or watch. And if either the Greenies or the Tigers, whoever wins today, should go on to victory as the NCAA finalists or even champions in the College Baseball World Series, year 2001, as the series winds down later this month, clips from today's game will be disseminated nationwide and beyond, on the television, Internet, and so on. Baseball is a free and open game.

My first question is, will ethnobiological knowledge ever be as freely available as baseball knowledge? Given the spread of individuals' home pages, web-based teaching, distance learning, internet classrooms, and other multimedia resources, clearly much new knowledge in many fields is becoming freely accessible to anyone who seeks it. For some reason, ethnobiological knowledge in the mental possession of specialists has developed a mystique that seems to constrain full disclosure in the media of our time. And this remains true when demand for such knowledge by students seems to be at an all time high. Ethnobiologists have long pondered the similarities and differences between knowledge encoded in an exclusively oral format and knowledge transmitted via more permanent media, such as written text, electronic publishing, video, and audio. Baseball players communicate the game on a fixed diamond grid according to special rules, timing, referees, and equipment, and they have been trained by specialists called coaches. Ethnobiologists transmit and translate data on relationships among people, language, culture, landscape, and biota that defy spatio-temporal fixation and universal laws that might govern their association. They are supposed to play, nevertheless, "by the rules." If every ethnobiology article was like a baseball game, perhaps a less exclusive medium than a scientific journal, such as this one, would be the right medium for broadcasting it.

However inclusive the subject matter of ethnobiology—hence, its multidisciplinary—its audience will continue to be more restricted than baseball's, at least in principle and if history is a guide. Ethnobiologists are involved in a lively debate as to the potential impact their special knowledge may have on humankind or segments thereof. True baseball fans rarely question the contribution that their game has made to human welfare. (Other scientists, such as nuclear physicists, of course, have also had some discomfiture with free disclosure of their own data, as have ethnobiologists, so the latter are not unique in this respect, though the rules of the nuclear game seem to be a bit more clear). The connection between basic and applied research in ethnobiology is no longer just on the horizon; it has been crossed. Perhaps in the Western world it was crossed half a millennium ago, when medieval herbalists in Spain, France, and England codified folk knowledge and beliefs about medicinal plants and animals. (On the other hand, maybe medieval herbalists were too naive linguistically, ethnographically, and biologically to be considered ethnobiologists proper, raising the subsidiary question as to what kind of training qualifies one to be an ethnobiologist?). Baseball games do not typically result in changes of the rules of the game or of sportsmanlike conduct. Because it isn't played on a diamond grid, ethnobiological knowledge yields findings with which people sometimes disagree vehemently, as in any science. Calls by umpires in baseball games may be issues of doubt and disagreement, but final scores cannot be changed. Even in some cases where the ethnobiological knowledge

in question has passed hurdles of peer review and editorial vetting, questions may persist as to whether it should or should not be disclosed in any media. But all this disagreement follows the rules, or at least it is supposed to do that.

My parting question is, what are the rules and who makes them in ethnobiology? Ethnobiologists don't have a single guide; in baseball, any book containing the rules will suffice, since the rules continue to be essentially the same and the different books available agree on them—the main differences are between leagues, and for junior players the rules may be somewhat defined locally. But these differences themselves are schematically quite minor in comparison, for example, to the philosophical differences evinced between the “utilitarianists” and the “intellectualists” of ethnobiological renown. And they are negligible when compared to the debate between those who would prevent disclosure of any knowledge deemed to be in the domain of intellectual property rights versus those who believe all knowledge developed by science (including ethnobiology) should be automatically and freely available to anyone, anywhere. Although I cannot offer a final answer to this last question, clearly the rules of the game of ethnobiology are ingrained in standards of scholarly inquiry agreed upon by panels of specialists, since those standards represent the first obstacle to be met when disclosing findings in this journal and other, related ones. Obviously many ethnobiologists agree on such standards, and shared commentary on manuscripts submitted for publication is a feature one notes as an editor (though not always, of course). In addition, and no less important, the codes of ethics of the Society of Ethnobiology and the International Society of Ethnobiology together with the ethical codes of the various sister disciplines that converge on ethnobiology, such as that of the American Anthropological Association, which are often updated, constitute a portion of the rules of the game, analogous in a not entirely supercilious way to sportsmanship in baseball. For the most part, these codes accommodate both sound science and ethical conduct in the field of research and study, even if the playing field lacks the psychologically salient and universal design of a baseball diamond. Although the knowledge from ethnobiology, now being produced in prodigious quantities, will probably never be as freely and completely available as the no-hitters, RBI's, home runs, double and triple plays, number of innings, and final score from your or my favorite baseball game, the audience for that knowledge conceivably could grow in sophistication and number with continuing informed debate and inquiry into the rules for research and conduct, as this debate develops in forums that are genuinely open, accessible, and democratic. I am basically optimistic, since it is clear from a recent increase in submissions to this journal and from many presentations at the last annual meeting of the Society of Ethnobiology (the abstracts from which are available at <http://www.ethnobiology.org>) that ethnobiology counts among its players many dedicated people who are inclined to keep the debate on the rules of the game alive in an admirably professional, forthright manner. It's time to close; the first pitch has just been thrown.

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