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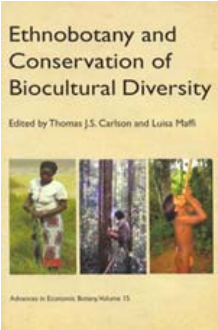
Reviews

Ethnobotany and Conservation of Biocultural Diversity (Advances in Economic Botany, V. 15)



Thomas J.S. Carlson and Luisa Maffi, eds.
The New York Botanical Gardens Press
ISBN: 0893274534

A growing recognition of humans as intrinsic parts of ecosystems implies that consideration of human activities and needs is as essential to successful conservation planning, as consideration of other species. Carlson and Maffi organize this volume of papers, given at the Sixteenth International Botanical Congress in 1999, into three sections. Part one focuses on indigenous knowledge and the creation/conservation of biodiversity in the Amazon Basin. Part two examines knowledge and sustainable use of plant resources in the Amazon Basin, sub-Saharan Africa, and Northern Vietnam. The book finishes with a section concerning ethical issues surrounding ethnobiological research and its dissemination – all too important in today's global culture.

Although the case studies presented in part one revolve around work in the Amazon Basin, they reflect larger issues. For example, López-Zent and Zent's work with the Hotï in Venezuelan Guayana demonstrates the complex relationship between humans and ecosystems. They use a combination of qualitative techniques to document ethnobotanic knowledge and the fact that lifestyle changes, like settlement and migration out of traditional habitats, affect the acquirement of this knowledge. Further behavioral research of the Hotï shows how subsistence-foraging activities impact the diversity of species, habitats, and function in southern Venezuela.

Cunningham's ecological footprint study shows how global demand for handicrafts shapes environmental and human health in southern and eastern Africa. Rural communities harvest plants, often unsustainably, to supplement meager incomes by producing products for the tourist and global market. However, trees felled to make furniture, drums, and masks are not available for fruit or medicine harvest. Tree harvest also reduces forest habitat available for endemic flora and fauna. Timber, fiber, and dye plant harvests threaten some plant species with regional extinction. Recommendations for reducing dependencies on wild plant resources and creating sustainable markets are based on Cunningham's extensive work in rural African communities.

But how can the needs and knowledge of increasingly marginalized communities be balanced with the obligation to conserve diminishing biological resources? Two final chapters highlight many of the ethical issues involved in ethnobotanical research. Globalization impacts knowledge flow, political dynamics, and property rights among other things. Even the most cautious scientist cannot predict all possible outcomes of their research. Authors Bannister and Barrett suggest that adopting the "precautionary principle" may aid in redirecting support to indigenous communities, creating stronger bonds between the indigenous and research communities, and furthering the goals of biocultural conservation.

Historically, ethnobotanists focused on either cultural use of plants or how groups perceive, classify and name plants. These trends are rapidly merging in the face of both cultural and biological extinction. Ethnobotany's position at the juncture between nature and culture provides a unique view for accessing information important for conservation. *Ethnobotany and Conservation of Biocultural Diversity* demonstrates how ethnobotanists can contribute to such inclusive planning.

Reviewed by Jen Shaffer, Department of Anthropology at University of Georgia.