



Plants, People and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany

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The relationship between plants and people is profound, affecting nearly every aspect of our lives. In this compelling new book, two of the world's leading ethnobotanists argue that the very roots of human culture are deeply intertwined with plants. Beginning with the prehistoric use of plants by hunter-gatherers and the development of agriculture, the authors argue that plants have deeply influenced the trajectory of civilization. One out of four prescription drugs, for example, was discovered from studies of plants used by indigenous peoples for healing, and today ethnobotanical searches for new remedies for AIDS, inflammation, and cancer are proceeding at a rapid pace. Complicating such searches, however, are rapid changes in the lifestyles and diets of indigenous peoples, which are linked to increasing levels of diabetes and arteriosclerosis. Yet, even here, understanding of indigenous diets can possibly lead to new strategies for treating disease. The inventive use of plants by indigenous shipwrights and weavers provides further evidence of the botanical sophistication of indigenous peoples, as does the shaman's use of plants to provide doorways into the other world - a world populated by both angelic and demonic beings. Although claims for such plants have sometimes been attributed to superstition, studies of these plants have revealed a plethora of novel compounds with potent neuropsychological impacts. Such compounds hold the promise of providing new treatments for psychiatric illness, but also the threat of societal disruption if their illegal traffic continues to grow. The view that plants themselves can be sacred leads to a startling reconsideration of the role of indigenous people in conservation. The authors, who have both spent decades in the tropics, persuasively argue that rain forest conservation can best be accomplished by learning from, rather than opposing, indigenous peoples and their concerns.

Plants, People and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany Details

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Trunatschild says

I got this book from my school library so it's a little outdated and may have been used as instructional material, so it's a general overview, not very in depth.

I've been interested in ethnobotany for at least a decade now. I like this book because it fits my interests, not so much of botany as in plants and the interaction of plants and peoples. Westerners, even the ones open to herbs for medicine don't want to think too deeply about the way that herbs are used in indigenous societies, they just want to pop a pill. Even western herbalists are locked into the way they were trained to think about illness and herbs. I enjoy learning how different peoples look at disease and what is important. For example, the majority of Western medicine is focused on the heart and nervous system, and this is nearly absent in indigenous cultures as they are active and eat a better diet than we do, so their focus is completely different. I recommend this book to anyone who's interested in Ethnobotany, it's well written, so an enjoyable read, not wading through a heavy tome, even for someone at least a little versed in ethnobotany, it's an enjoyable read and it's outdatedness is barely noticeable.

Kiyana Williams says

Enjoying the book.

Trinity School Summer Reading says

This is all about ethnobotany by two of its principle researchers.

Lindsey says

Good reference; a little slanted towards Brazil, Samoa, and Belize, but an overall good introduction to ethnobotany and the roles of plants in cultures.

samantha says

excellent book on ethnobotany.

Geoffrey Benn says

“Plants, People, and Culture,” by Michael Balick and Paul Cox is a well-written introduction to the field of ethnobotany, a scientific discipline that seeks to understand the relationship between indigenous peoples and the plants that they use for food, material culture, medicine, and spiritual purposes. The book was written for the Scientific American Library, meaning that, much like the magazine, it is written for well-educated, but general audiences, and includes lots of excellent visuals. This book was my first introduction to ethnobotany – I found both the methodologies and research questions extremely interesting. The field requires workers to employ techniques from a wide-range of specialties, from plant biochemistry and genetics (my areas of expertise) to taxonomy, ecology, and anthropology. These techniques are used for a variety of goals, from preserving vanishing indigenous cultures and knowledge, to identifying new pharmaceuticals, to guiding conservation efforts. Overall, I found the book to be fascinating and enjoyable to read – I recommend it to anyone who is interested in botany, history of science, or anthropology.

Michael says

Good reference book.

Ari says

Assigned reading for class. A good outline of what the study of ethnobotany is.
