



Two Ethnobotanists

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Editorial

I have had the privilege of working with a range of students interested in ethnobotany. Their interests emerge from many different directions. Sometimes they have had an experience in life that has generated their interest, such as working in the Peace Corp., serving as a missionary, growing up in a minority family, or living in another country during a study abroad program. Many have been influenced by popular writings of ethnobotanists, particularly those that emphasize the excitement of exploring for medicinal plants in tropical cultures. Most often, they have become dissatisfied with biological science activities that do not consider the roles of humans.

Definitions of ethnobotany have been well hashed out with a consensus view centering on something like “the study of human (cultural) interactions (and relationships) with plants (and environments).” However, there has been little attention to what an ethnobotanist is. This would seem to be fairly obvious: An ethnobotanist is someone who “studies human (cultural) interactions (and relationships) with plants (and environments).” But, it is not that easy.

New students approaching the study of ethnobotany sort out into several categories based upon interests in learning:

- Facts and trivia about exotic plants and cultures
- Practical skills in cultural practices
- Scientific methods for studying uses of plants
- Means for exploiting plants, particularly as sources of new pharmaceuticals
- How to save traditional knowledge from changing and being lost
- How to meet and interact with interesting people from other cultures and travel around the world to meet them
- How to be an academic “Peace Corp” worker

I group these into three categories or people who are interested:

1. in becoming cultural practitioners (*sensu lato*) employing plants and knowledge of plants within their practice

2. in learning to be scientists who study human interactions with plants
3. primarily in adventure, who are more or less naïve about science, culture, and ethnobotany as a scientific discipline

I can sympathize with the third category because I also have always had a longing to explore, wander and see the world. One of the more important traits of scientists is the desire to explore the unknown. However, there is a profound difference between an explorer as scientist and an explorer as tourist. Sadly, many of the students in the category seem to be tourists at heart and are strongly resistant to the work involved in learning science, culture, and ethnobotany.

The first category is problematic. In fact, it is what has led me to write this essay. It is possible and reasonable to define ethnobotany as “the science of botany as seen and practiced through a particular cultural lens.” In this case, practitioners within a culture would be “ethnobotanists” and what they do would be ethnobotany. This is largely inconsistent with the global practice of ethnobotany as published in journals such as *Economic Botany*, *Conservation Biology*, *Ethnobiology*. If this is accepted as ethnobotany, then the logical place for one to learn ethnobotany is not in a University but within a traditional cultural setting. [Note that in this paradigm, the University training of a “botanist,” “pharmacist,” “naturopath,” “agricultural extension agent,” etc. could be considered as the training

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of an “ethnobotanist” within modern global society.] Most ethnobotanists would probably agree that as ethnobotanists they are not cultural practitioners, *per se*, but rather that as ethnobotanists they study (or study with) cultural practitioners. The difference is subtle and in some cases blurred, but still meaningful.

The second category is what I think most professional ethnobotanists would agree is the task an ethnobotanist does and should learn to do. The kinds of work that an ethnobotanist does can be applied or theoretical but is based upon scientific methods, principles and theories that direct the ethnobotanist to logical decisions and conclusions. It is likely that an ethnobotanist will be able to explore the world, cultures, and many other things. It is also likely that an ethnobotanist can also be or become some type of cultural practitioner. However, in the end, an ethnobotanist is first and foremost a scientist.

My initial instinct was to end this with the last sentence above. However, I don't think that is correct, reasonable, or even fair. Let me return to consideration of the first category of ethnobotanist through relating an event that recently happened to me.

A botany consultant was hired by a Native American community to provide advice on the development of an ethnobotany educational program at a small college. The consultant, who was not an ethnobotanist by training or practice, looked to a variety of sources for recommendations and information. When she spoke with me I discussed the program we have at the University of Hawai'i that is intended to produce ethnobotanists of the second category above. However, through the course of our conversation,

it became clear that her mission was to develop a program for the training of ethnobotanists of the first category. The emergent question was: Is the training of these two kinds of ethnobotanists different? And if so, how and why?

The heart of the answer must lay in the differences in the kinds of work that each category of ethnobotanist is likely to do (Table 1). The first category is primarily trained to be a cultural practitioner who uses plants within cultural practices. The second category is primarily trained to work with cultural practitioners in order to address scientific questions about cultural practices. Although not at all exclusive, a common difference is that the first category is primarily for cultural insiders or members, while the second category is for cultural outsiders.

Another important difference is that the first category is culture specific with training providing insight into other (particularly related) cultures but not necessarily cross-cultural transferable knowledge and practices. To the contrary, the second category is not necessarily culture specific but instead emphasizes the generalities of human cultural practices and general scientific methods for analysis of specific cultural practices.

I believe that the training for these two approaches to ethnobotany is different. Likewise, the kinds of work that are likely to be done can, and probably will, be different by these overlapping kinds of ethnobotanists. Because of this, I conclude that it is very good that there is more than one kind of ethnobotanist and hope that as ethnobotanists we are able to recognize and promote this kind of diversity within our research and educational institutions.

Table 1. Two general categories of ethnobotanists and some of their primary differences.

Primary Aspects	Ethnobotanists	
	Category 1	Category 2
Cultural Background	Within culture	Variable
Training	Cultural setting (not Universities)*	University / globalized education systems
Jobs, roles in society	Cultural practitioner (health care, carpentry, farming, merchant, etc.)	Scientist (conservation biology, government or private resource management, international development, etc.)
Work location/setting	Within culture/local	Global although often in tropical, developing countries and/or with minority populations
Cultural orientation	Often ethnocentric	Often xenocentric or ethnorelativist
Dominant paradigm	Specific cultural world view	Globalized science
Sources of prior knowledge	Tradition (oral or written), senior practitioners	Scientific literature, senior practitioners
Sources of new knowledge	Practice experience, observations, experimentation	Experimentation, observations
Distribution of new knowledge	Passed on to the new practitioners and not usually others	Published as results and interpretations for anyone
Use of new knowledge	Practice improvement, better society	Theory or addressing specific needs

*There is an increasingly common trend for development of University programs organized by cultural practitioners with the purpose of training new cultural practitioners.