Justin Nolan: Wild Harvest in the Heartland: Ethnobotany in Missouri's Little Dixie

Lahnam, MD: University Press of America, 2007, 100 pp, ISBN 0-7618-36535 19.95 (paper)

Jan Salick

Wild Harvest in the Heartland: Ethnobotany in Missouri's Little Dixie (an area running approximately from Kansas City through Jefferson City) by Justin Nolan is a very nice little book. At first blush, it seems like the perfect example for upper level undergraduate and beginning graduate students of well designed methodology using ANTHROPAC and of basic descriptions of 30 most common useful plants. However, on reading further it is obvious that description and hypothesis testing of comparative knowledge of "experts" and "non-experts" and other hypotheses is only the foundation of this study. There are many essential ideas introduced.

Relating to the initial hypothesis, Nolan finds that plant experts have more extensive, detailed and esoteric knowledge about many more plants than non-experts. Specifically, they know many more medicinal uses of roots and herbs and they are aware of plants that do not grow locally.

In a broader arena, Heartland expands the domain of ethnobotany. Ethnobotany, all too often, focuses on traditional, non-industrialized societies; this book draws our attention to natural resource knowledge in our own backyard. Here there is an emphasis on regional traditions, grounded in history and modified by culture. The dynamic process of modification and revision of ethnobotanical knowledge is a field of investigation woefully under-studied. Here it is acknowledged and incorporated into the study. Cultural origins of Little Dixie knowledge are diverse, emanating from the British Isles and Southern Appalachia, as well as from Native Americans. Continual innovation and experimentation has allowed this hybrid knowledge to further evolve. Moreover, Nolan unequivocally finds that culture and ecology are inextricably linked.

Nolan points out that plant knowledge is built on species that are readily available, undoubtedly perceived, and sensorially appealing. Plant families of particular use value are favored including the fruits and berries of the rose family, the beans of the legume family, and brightly colored flowers of the aster family. From these data, Nolan argues self-evidently that human recognition of plants is selective and systematic.

If these are not transformative conclusions, they are certainly basic to a dynamic and theoretical view of ethnobotany. Under the sure and steady tutelage of Professor Deborah Pearsall, Nolan has produced a well researched vision of ethnobotany of Little Dixie—famous for its anti-bellum plantation history—in the Missouri heartland, which simultaneously addresses global issues.

J. Salick (✉)
Missouri Botanical Garden,
St. Louis, MO, USA
e-mail: jan.salick@mobot.org