Ethnobiology

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Elizabeth Anne Olson • John Richard Stepp
Editors

Plants and Health

New Perspectives
on the Health-Environment-Plant Nexus

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Preface

The case studies collected here are concerned with the theme of plants, humans, and health from anthropological perspectives. The genesis for this volume was a session entitled, “Plants & Health: Producing Anthropologies at the Human-Environment-Health Nexus,” at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting held in Washington D.C. in November 2014. During the session, and spilling into the rest of the afternoon, we engaged in lengthy conversations about the connections between our ethnographic research and the importance of this type of research at this moment in time. Since the conference, we have toiled with these topics further, pushed deeper into our own research, grappled with various theoretical perspectives, refined the case studies (and even added some new ones).

This volume showcases current ethnographic accounts of the ways that people use plants to promote human health and well-being. The goal in this volume is to highlight some contemporary examples of how plants are central to various aspects of healthy environments and healthy minds and bodies. The authors employ diverse analytic frameworks, including interpretive and constructivist, political-ecological, systems theory, phenomenological, and critical studies of the human-environment-state interactions. The case studies represent a wide range have of geographies and contemplate a range of the health appeals that plants and herbs.

The volume begins by considering how plants may intrinsically be “healthful” and the notion that ecosystem health may be a literal concept deployed in contemporary efforts to increase awareness of environmental degradation. The characteristics of specific plant species, and the role of specific species in ecosystems, are significant for socially-attuned conservation. Thinking more about the relationships between the individual and the plants, the production of herbal and plant-based remedies may be therapeutic for the producer who has the advantages of experiencing the plants through the various stages of product production. An example of a woman who produces medicinal plant remedies highlights the apparent embodiment of the healthful attributes of the plant-based remedies she makes and sells. The volume continues with the exploration of the ways in which medically pluralistic societies demonstrate the entanglements of state and citizen. In other examples, we

find that profit-driven models of extraction and production of medicinal plant products can be related to health sovereignty for the state and perhaps also for individuals. Several of the chapters in this volume work to unpack the epistemologies of medicinal plant knowledge and the globalization of medicinal plant knowledge. The translocal and global networks of medicinal plant knowledge are pivotal to productions of medicinal and herbal plant remedies that are used by people in all varieties of societies and cultural groups. Humans produce health through various means and interact with our environments, especially plants, in order to promote health.

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About the Editors

Elizabeth Anne Olson is an assistant professor of anthropology at Southern Utah University in Cedar City, Utah. Her anthropological research has looked at traditional and non-biomedical healing systems in Mexico, Utah, the Bolivian Amazon, and Western Europe. Her work with traditional healing systems has led to a focus on the intersections among health, environments, economic markets, and community development. Her past work has focused on indigenous medicinal plant knowledge, and she is currently studying the ways that globalization influences the transmission of medicinal plant knowledge and use. Dr. Olson's current research concerns the globalization of medicinal plant knowledge and the relationships between indigenous, professional, and lay uses of medicinal plant knowledge across various ethnomedical systems. Her work connects to topics including the health sovereignty movement, as well as other social justice and community-based conservation initiatives. She frequently collaborates with community-based social justice projects in Mexico and the USA. Dr. Olson serves on the Board of Directors of the Culture and Agriculture section of the American Anthropological Association and is the Conference & Awards Coordinator for the Society of Ethnobiology. She is co-editor along with Cynthia Fowler of the monograph series *Global Change/Global Health* for the University of Arizona Press.

John Richard Stepp is a professor at the University of Florida in the Department of Anthropology and Tropical Conservation and Development program. He is also a visiting professor at the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo, Italy, and was in residence at the University of Hawaii as the Wilder Professor of Botany. He has conducted biocultural conservation research over the last two decades throughout the tropics, especially in the Maya Forest and in the Greater Mekong Region of Southeast Asia. His research explores persistence, change, and variation of traditional ecological knowledge and ethnobiology. Much of this work has focused on wild food plants and medicinal plants. His work has also focused on patterns and causes in the distribution of biological and cultural diversity (biocultural diversity) on both regional and global scales. Other interests include the anthropology of food, medical anthropology, visual anthropology, social science

research methods, GIS and land use change, and the anthropology of climate change. He is also involved in documentary and ethnographic film production on topics both related and unrelated to his primary research. He is the founding editor of the *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* and former editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Ethnobiology*. Along with Robert Voeks, he serves as an Ethnobiology series editor for Springer.

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