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Book Review

Huastec Mayan Ethnobotany. Janis B. Alcorn. University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78712. 1984. 982 pp. \$40.00.

Alcorn's book has been described as "a major contribution to Mayan studies, integrating botanical and anthropological approaches to the dynamics of plant-human interrelationships." It is more. It is a landmark in ethnobotany, and its importance far transcends the field of Mayan studies, because, in the words of the author, it "is concerned with the ways human perception of plants can influence the vegetational environment" and "draws a new critical perspective on the sorts of questions that need to be addressed for understanding human ecology."

The author maintains that the practical use of ethnobotanical studies—e.g., as an aid in the search for new biodynamic plants—is outmoded and that the scope of ethnobotany has changed since Harshberger first employed the term in 1895 to mean "the study of plants used by primitive and aboriginal people." She offers a newer definition of ethnobotany: "The study of varied interrelations between humans and plants."

While not all specialists would denigrate the older, more practical type of ethnobotany in favour of the newer and much broader explanation, it is true that ethnobotany has broadened its horizons and thus has become far more interdisciplinary in recent decades. And the field can certainly welcome more such comprehensive works as the one that Alcorn offers here.

The main part of the work is divided into five chapters: 1) Introduction to Huastec Ethnobotany; 2) the Huastec-Teenek Operational Environment; 3) Teenek Tsabaal, the Cognizant Environment; 4) Plant Resources and their Management—Human Response to Plants; and 5) Ethnobotanical Processes—Human Impact on the Plants of Teenek Tsabaal. There is a group of Appendices, including an ethnobotanical atlas of Teenek Tsabaal plants, a systematic list of plants, a standard name key, and a glossary. The bibliography of 271 items indicates the breadth of familiarity with the pertinent literature that reinforces the extensive and intensive field work in this disjunct Mayan group living in northeastern Mexico.

The claim by the University of Texas Press that this book will be indispensable not only to those interested in Mayan studies but also to specialists in human ecology, ethnomedicine, economic botany, and "peasant agriculture" is an understatement. It should be widely acclaimed as a model of thoroughness in the fast developing and ever broadening field that we call ethnobotany.

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