

Letter from the Editor

Ethnobotany is the scientific study of the relationships that exist between people and plants. It is both an old and a new science. The term was only coined in 1895, but ethnobotanical phenomena had already been recorded by ancient Chinese and Greek herbals over two thousand years ago, and traditional knowledge about plant use has been passed orally from generation to generation since the dawn of humanity.

Ethnobotany is an interdisciplinary science. It is located on the borders of botany, agricultural sciences, cultural anthropology, pharmacology, archaeology, linguistics and many other domains. Because of its strong link with the humanities, it has sometimes been disregarded in the academic world, treated as an inferior kind of science, too humanistic, too descriptive. However, ethnobiological studies have brought many discoveries to humanity: apart from the discovery of many pharmaceuticals and most psychoactive substances, ethnobotanists have contributed to finding new plant varieties and species. We are also learning more and more about traditional ecosystem management from rural communities around the world. These are only a couple of examples of how ethnobotany opens new perspectives for research in other fields of science.

One of the main topics in ethnobotany is wild food plants. In the beginning of the 20th century this issue was relevant as malnutrition was widespread in all countries of the world, and memories of famines were very fresh. Now we want to document this knowledge and learn about the use of wild food plants from traditional societies as it is rapidly disappearing, and due to growing concerns about food security in a world dominated by only a few kinds of crops with less and less genetic diversity in them.

While North American scholars began to label what they do as ethnobotany over a hundred years ago, European scholars only occasionally used these terms before the 1970s, so the greatest Polish pioneers of the ethnobotany of wild food plants never used this term. However, I would like to pay tribute to

four such individuals. First of all I mention Józef Rostański (1850–1928), the botanist who in 1883 issued a 70 question ethnobotanical questionnaire concerning most areas of plant use and folk names and distributed it throughout the territory of the former Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania. Other pioneers in Poland were Adam Maurizio (1862–1941), an economic botanist of Swiss origin, who issued his brilliant history of plant food in human history first in Polish in 1926 and then in German in 1927, and Kazimierz Moszyński (1887–1959), the ethnographer whose “Folk culture of Slavs” (1929) is incredibly rich in ethnobiological detail. Last but not least is Józef Gajek, another ethnographer, who organized systematic detailed cartographic studies of wild food plant use in Poland twice, in 1948 and 1964.

Eastern and northern Europe have tremendous amounts of historical and ethnographic sources concerning the use of plants. However, as they are written in many national languages, they are difficult to access for foreign scholars interested in comparative studies. These sources are also often scattered in little-known small publications, so even local researchers have problems finding out about them. That is why one of the objectives of this volume is to present a few reviews of wild edible plant use on a national scale. These reviews were inspired by reviews of wild edible plants of Spain, Bosnia-Herzegovina from 2006 and Poland from 2007. Here we present such monographs for Slovakia, Estonia, Hungary, Sweden and Iceland. The fact that the reviews contain predominantly historical data does not mean that we think ethnobiological studies are finished in Eastern Europe – on the contrary, we think that, precisely because of the devolution of traditional knowledge, its last remnants should be recorded. Although some of the heritage has been extensively preserved, e.g. concerning medicinal plants, domains such as ethnomycology and ethnoecology have still not been properly researched in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

We hope that the reviews published in this volume and all the historical data of ethnobiological character, which are so rich in some European countries, at least in Great Britain, France, Germany, Poland, Estonia and Hungary, will inspire more diachronic studies allowing us to trace changes in plant use over the centuries. Unfortunately, many modern ethnobiological studies lack such historical background, either because of the lack of data or because of ignorance. Most of the reviews published in this volume are focused on countries or regions, and present long lists of species used. However, I would be happy if one day we could make another kind of collection of reviews, including pan-European or regional monographs of the use of some plant taxa, over centuries and countries, similar to those created recently for *Stachys palustris* (published in Genetic Resources and Crop Evolution) and *Glyceria* (in Human Ecology), or the articles about *Polygonatum* and pteridophytes in China from this volume. Alternatively, such reviews could be published in the form of one article per issue in a series called “European ethnobotanical species monographs”, taking an example from the series “Biological flora of the British Isles” regularly published by the Journal of Ecology.

We also wanted to look at the issue of wild food plants from a worldwide perspective, hence we invited a few prominent ethnobotanists from outside Europe. Even though this volume unfortunately omits some parts of the globe, we are publishing a few interesting reviews from North and South America, as well as Eastern Asia and Oceania.

I would like to thank all the authors who contributed articles for this collection. However, I am particularly indebted to three of them. The first is Professor Andrea Pieroni, who several years ago inspired me to become an ethnobotanist and who has led the research on the ethnobotany of isolated rural communities in southern and south-eastern Europe, constantly emphasizing the unity of ethnobotanical studies in rural Europe and other continents. The second person is Dr. Renata Sõukand who organized the first Eastern European ethnobiological seminar in 2010, in Padise, Estonia, gathering most of the eastern European ethnobiologists together. And the third is Dr. Ingvar Svanberg, who for years enriched us with his incredibly deep and vast knowledge of the history of ethnobiological studies in Eurasia.

Ethnobotanists have a relatively limited number of journals to publish in. Out of the international journals indexed in the Journal Citation Reports only a few have a considerable proportion of articles devoted to this science, namely the Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine, Economic Botany, the Journal of Ethnopharmacology, Human Ecology, and Genetic Resources and Crop Evolution. Additionally, there are Ethnobotany Research and Application and the Journal of Ethnobiology, not yet on this list. A few other respected international journals also occasionally publish ethnobotanical papers, e.g. the Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society. So we are happy to broaden the venue for ethnobotanists by opening a permanent Ethnobotany section in Acta Societatis Botanicorum Poloniae.

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