PREFACE

Barbara Wilson (Kii'iljuus)

Kii'iljuus han.uu dii kiiGa ga. I am Kii'iljuus. I am a member of the *Xaaydaga* (Haida) Nation. No matter where you and your family may have originated, as with me, your ancestors, at an initial point in their lives, experimented with, used, and relied on plants, whether from water or land, and this is the basis of ethnobotany.

In my world, which is the world of my ancestors, when it was "light then, and yet dark" (Swanton 1905, 110), our stories tell of the young woman with her baby, of how she brought the knowledge of the plants and their uses to us. In order to see her, one had to be especially pure and clean. She told a pure young man, who managed to catch her, of every property of every plant and the ways they could be used. She told him this in an effort to have him set her free. The one secret she did not tell him was what medicine to use in order to live forever (see Turner 2004). Our stories tell of the plants and their supernatural properties; the importance of plants as a source of food, medicine, fibre, and wood; and of how to use them as cleansers and in spiritual ways. Today, we still use the names created and taught by our ancestors. These names and the knowledge of the plants are a vital part of our language.

Our close connection to the land and ocean through daily life and travel during at least the last ten thousand years has been a very important teacher. Because they learned of the plants' value as medicines and foods, my ancestors knew exactly what assisted in healing, how to prepare them, when to harvest them, and how to store them. They also knew the good properties and the toxic properties of plants. They were aware of which ones needed to be handled with extreme care. Respect for these "fellow travellers" has been learned through eons of trial and error. Until recently, these lessons have been passed down by grandmothers, aunts, and other knowledgeable family members through oral teachings and practical showings.

When the colonial governments of the country introduced "laws," the normal way of passing on this knowledge was, in many areas, either severed or pushed underground, only to resurface once more with the relaxing of these laws in 1951. Today many First Nations individuals in British Columbia – along the coast, in the mountains, on plateaus, and along the valleys where the rivers run – continue to carry this knowledge, to practise the use of plants in their daily lives, and to educate their

children and families about them. In many areas uses of plants may be very similar, distinguished only by the local Indigenous name and geographical distance.

Depending on the climate and the physical makeup of an area, plants show up in different countries around the world. I recall the thrill of being in Nova Scotia and above the Arctic Circle in Norway and recognizing plants I knew from home – *X̲aaydaga Gwaay.yaay* (Haida Gwaii). It is probable, with the thousands of years of living close to the land and sea, that people all over the world have known the properties and uses of the local plants, the same as us.

Increasingly, as life is changing for all people, there has been a general distancing from the knowledge of how to gather, use, and teach about our own plants. With the teachings, and with living with First Nations experts who have retained this knowledge, it is possible to learn about the connection all of us have to the world in which we live and, with that, to capture once more the respect for our lands.

Along with the alienation from our homelands and plants comes the lack of feeling that we belong. Maybe if we all felt like we belonged here, better care would be taken when considering what to do, what to plant, and how to relate to the land and plants. Learning about plants is one way of drawing our daily lives closer to the earth. The respect these generous beings deserve can be learned and passed on to coming generations. How you treat these fine neighbours will determine what kind of a life you will live and what kind of a world will be passed on to your descendants.

The term "ethnobotany" has existed since 1895. For the most part, it is the First Nations of each area who work to recapture or revive the knowledge that has enabled ethnobotany to become a university-credited subject. As you continue your education you may be fortunate enough to choose ethnobotany and, with that, to travel out on the lands of the various First Nations of British Columbia to experience the thrill of seeing and learning about the old orchards and root garden remnants in the old villages as well as the various gardens along the shorelines or in intertidal spots: *naw nay* (octopus houses), *taa kíi daanaay ky'uu* (clam gardens), *giiliiG̲aan* (fishing weirs), *hlk̲ud kaatíis hlG̲aa* (stone fences). These are all reminders of the knowledge and skills our ancestors employed to make life better for the thousands who lived on the land prior to the epidemics that swept our lands. In the museums around the world you will find old fishing lines, hooks, baskets, and other daily-life utensils made from the plants in our lands. This knowledge

has thankfully been gathered and shared with people in ethnobotany classes through the years, and, as descendants of those ancestors who had the foresight to share, we can gain access to this knowledge in written form. The academics have made use of and are teaching the knowledge, which is a validation of the oral passing on of many levels of First Nations knowledge. With that validation comes an opportunity to heal some of the old wounds. In the past forty years many academics have come to our lands and some continue to visit on a regular basis, giving back to the younger generations. This respectful interaction through the decades has created relationships filled with appreciation, trust, and honour for the people involved. It is important to establish this foundation so we can move forward together, making a better world – one filled with support, respect, and learning. For that I am eternally thankful. *Haawa*.

REFERENCES

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