

INTRODUCTION TO ETHNOBOTANY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA:

Plants and People in a Changing World

DANA LEPOFSKY AND NANCY J. TURNER

ETHNOBOTANY IS, in a nutshell, the study of the relationships between people and plants. All humans rely on plants for survival, but our relationships with plants today are often disconnected and fragmented, especially in urbanized, industrialized societies. For those peoples who are indigenous to a place – who have lived in one locale for a long period of time and who depend on their local environments for the vast majority of the resources they need – the ties to the plant world tend to remain strong and direct. In British Columbia, as elsewhere in the world, plants have been critically important to the lifeways of Indigenous peoples since “the beginning of time.” This importance is reflected in the hundreds of species of plants, algae, and fungi with individual names in one or more of the Indigenous languages of British Columbia; the archaeological and oral historical records of long-standing use of many of these species as foods, materials, and medicines; as well as their pivotal role in social and economic relations, stories, and ceremonies. In the past, within any of the over thirty Indigenous language groups of the province, even young children would have been familiar with many plants and their applications. However, there were, and still are, particular individuals who are trained specialists and experts in different aspects of plant use – tending, harvesting, weaving, carving, and healing – these are the original ethnobotanists.

Ethnobotany was first proposed as an academic discipline in the United States in 1895 by archaeologist John Harshberger (Harshberger 1896). Right around this time, and in the succeeding decades, early European explorers and ethnographers, particularly Franz Boas, Harlan Smith, and James Teit, started documenting details of ethnobotanical knowledge of the First Peoples of British Columbia and neighbouring areas (cf. Boas 1921, 1930; Newcombe 1897–1916; Smith 1928; Steedman and Teit 1930). In recording the names, uses, and cultural attributes of plants, these people, mostly men, tended to follow the classic methods of natural history and ethnography, as did their counterparts across North America.

Since then, the study of people-plant relationships in British Columbia has broadened and deepened in scope, right up to the present time. Some of the earlier gaps in knowledge and understanding have been filled in through archaeological research and through working with contemporary experts in Indigenous knowledge, like Clan Chief Adam Dick (Kwaxsistalla), of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation; Dr. Mary Thomas of the Secwépemc Nation; Dr. Margaret Siwallace of the Nuxalk Nation; and dozens of others, whose experiences and insights cover that “middle” period of the early and mid-1900s as well as more recently. Ethnobotany in British Columbia has become highly relevant in addressing some of the major challenges we are facing relating to threats to biological diversity, environmental change, cultural erosion, and language loss.

This special issue of *BC Studies* is a compendium reflecting the state of ethnobotany in the province, including its diverse methods, its predominant themes, its integration with other disciplines, and its future directions. Ethnobotanical approaches today are highly collaborative, with Indigenous plant experts and First Nations communities often taking a leading role and people from different fields combining their methods and insights. This work is represented in the present volume, with articles authored by some of these First Nations individuals in collaboration with academic colleagues.

The major topics included here – colonial influences on and perceptions of ethnobotanical knowledge, paleoethnobotany, plants and landscapes, traditional plant management systems, ethnobotanical classification, and nutritional contributions of plants – reflect some, but by no means all, of the richness of more recent ethnobotanical studies in the region. However, due to space limitations, there are research areas upon which we did not focus. In particular, we did not include articles on Indigenous plant medicines or plants in Indigenous technologies (although the latter is touched upon in one case study). Studies involving DNA and isotope analysis promise to play a significant role in future ethnobotanical research but are not covered in this volume. Also not included here, but of growing importance, are legal and ethical considerations in ethnobiology, such as addressing cultural and intellectual property rights of Indigenous peoples (Hardison and Bannister 2011; Bannister and Solomon 2009). Entire volumes could be written on any of these topics for British Columbia alone (cf. Stewart 1977, 1984; and Turner 1998 for plant technology). Perhaps in the future they will be dealt with in the depth they deserve. Figure 1 presents a map of BC First Nations as referred to in this volume.

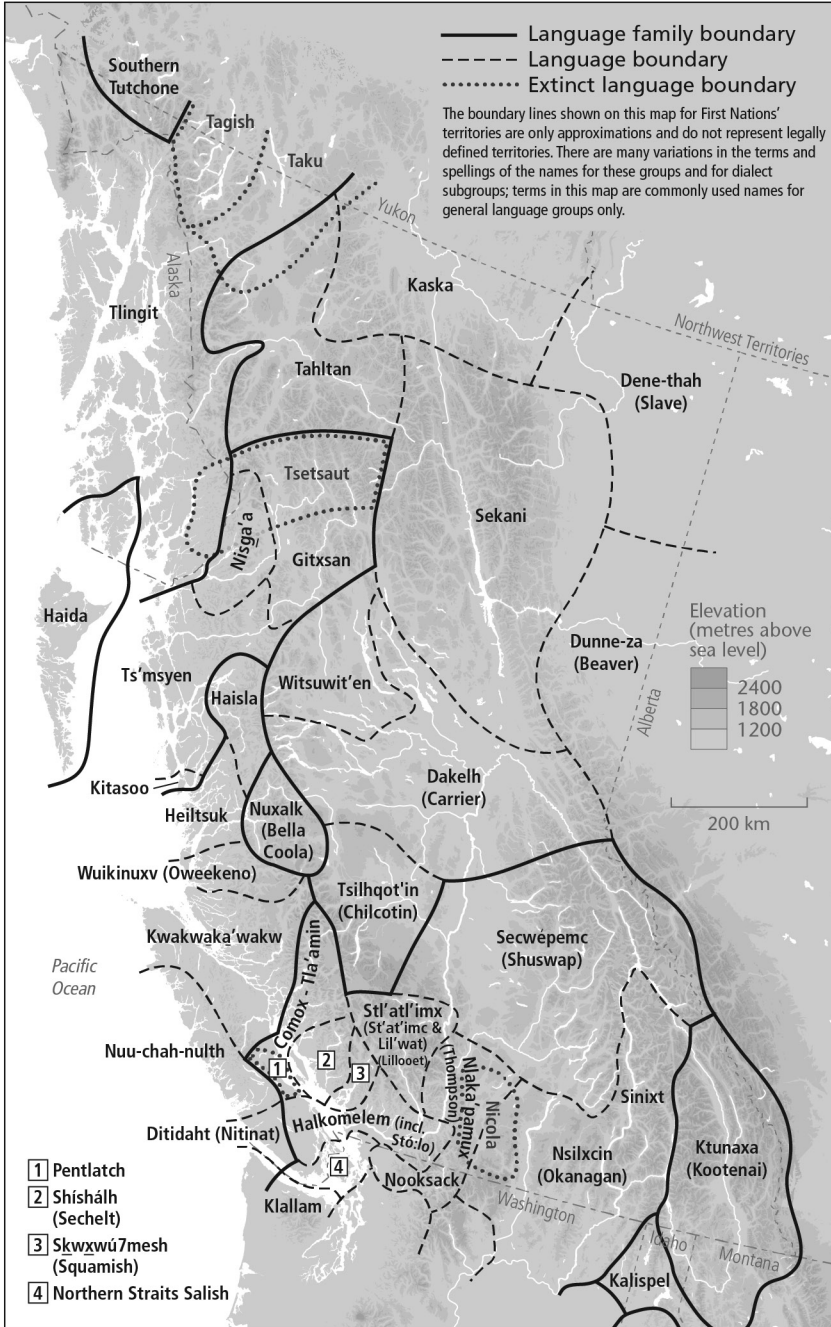


Figure 1. Map of British Columbia First Nations Language Groups (originally drawn by Robert D. Turner; redrawn by Eric Leinberger).

We are deeply grateful to the many Indigenous plant experts of British Columbia whose knowledge is reflected in the field of ethnobotany as well as to our colleagues in various aspects of ethnobotanical research, many of whom are also participants in the project. We also thank the peer reviewers of our articles for their painstaking and helpful critiques. Finally, we would like to thank, with gratitude, Dr. Richard Mackie and Dr. Graeme Wynn, editors; and Leanne Coughlin and Jessica Walker, managing editors of *BC Studies*, for suggesting this special issue and for their constant interest and support. We also acknowledge the excellent copy editing of Dr. Joanne Richardson and the assistance of Janice Beley at the *BC Studies* office.

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