

BOOK REVIEWS

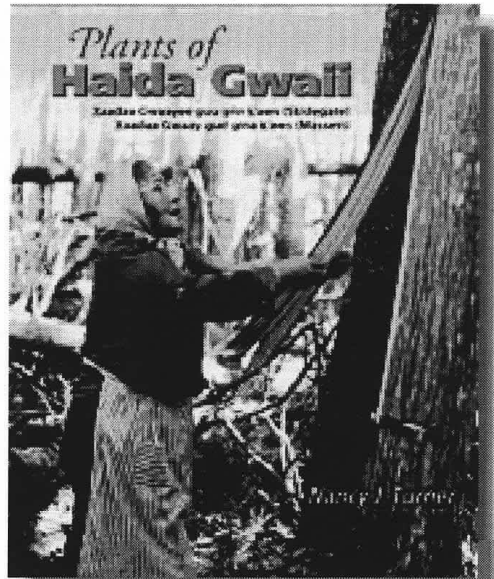
Plants of Haida Gwaii

by Nancy Turner

Sono Nis Press, Winlaw, BC, 2004.
264 pp., illus., refs, index. Price: ISBN 1-55039-144-5, \$38.95
Cdn

Nancy Turner begins *Plants of Haida Gwaii* by acknowledging several Haida who made indispensable contributions to this book and by offering a Prayer for Haida Medicine written by Gwaaganad (Diane Brown). Turner's long and respectful association and collaboration with the Haida are apparent throughout the pages of this volume. The bulk of this work is drawn from her doctoral research at the University of British Columbia in the early 1970s, in addition to subsequent research by Turner and several linguists, and data collated from archival sources and ethnographies. This information is synthesized into a compelling narrative that demonstrates the importance of traditional plant knowledge, cross-cultural communication, and inter-disciplinary study in contemporary research. *Plants of Haida Gwaii* is engagingly written, clearly organized, beautifully illustrated with photos by Nancy and Robert Turner and artwork by Giitsxaa (Ron Wilson), and generally well-deserving of its Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia's medal for Historical Writing.

The book is divided into a series of sections that thematically construct the relationship between Haida and the animate world. The preface and introduction acquaint the reader with the Haida and their lands and resources, but also suggest the nature of interaction between Turner and her Haida collaborators. Advisors from The Haida Watchmen Program, Massett and Skidegate Band Councils and Elders Groups provided guidance about the structure and content of the ethnobotanical information presented. Traditional plant knowledge of various Indigenous Peoples worldwide—and particularly pharmacological knowledge—has been used by outside institutions or entrepreneurs in ways that are ecologically irresponsible and disrespectful to their owners, such as the over-harvest of yew trees for the drug Taxol. Haida advisors to this research took great care in choosing what information to share with a broad audience, including scientists, aboriginal and non-aboriginal people, and the general public. Their omissions are noteworthy. For instance, knowledge regarding the medicinal and spiritual uses of plants is presented in a general sense, while specifics such as collection methods or recipes are withheld be-



cause they are “considered private knowledge” not suitable “for a book such as this” (p. 21). In her own consultations with Elders about plant medicines and spiritual uses, Turner considered all perspectives and took a conservative stance in what should be submitted for public consumption (Gold, pers. comm.).

The third and fourth sections of Turner's volume discuss the role of plants in Haida culture, working from general to specific. The third section describes plants used traditionally for foods, medicines, and technologies, in ceremonies and narratives. A classification of plants in the Haida language derived from Turner's dissertation is outlined, using an orthography developed by linguists and adapted to suit present-day Haida pedagogical needs. The fourth section, which comprises the main body of the book, is organized using this Haida plant taxonomy. It meticulously documents the cultural uses of 150 plant species, combining knowledge collected from and verified by Elders over the past 30 years by Turner and others, with information from ethnographic and historical sources such as Blackman, Newcombe, Swanton, and Boas. Unlike Turner's earlier ethnobotanical handbooks of Coastal First Peoples, the plant descriptions do not contain botanical characteristics, habitat, and distribution (which are available elsewhere, as well-referenced in the foregoing section) but instead focus on traditional knowledge such as aboriginal harvest, produc-

tion, cultural uses and related narratives. Traditional narratives are often highlighted in boxes alongside the text.

The utility of *Plants of Haida Gwaii* to archaeologists is manifold. The careful documentation of contemporary and historic plant use among the Haida provides a clear source for developing correlates that can be tested through palaeoethnobotanical, featural, household, artifactual, environmental, or other archaeological data. Palaeoethnobotanists especially have benefited from Turner's ethnobotanical publications—this being no exception—as a means to understand and interpret the growing body of archaeobotanical data being collected across British Columbia. Another substantive contribution of this volume to archaeology, as noted, concerns the collaboration described between Haida Nation and Nancy Turner. Turner does an admirable job of negotiating her position as friend, advocate, scientist and researcher to the Haida. Captain Gold, who served as an advisor to this book and has developed an Indigenous Red Cedar Archaeology on Haida Gwaii, recently suggested to me that “Nancy got it right from the start”; she has always held Haida Elders and their knowledge in highest regard and serves as a model for research in Haida territory (Gold, pers. comm.).

Plants of Haida Gwaii is an impressive compendium of traditional and modern plant knowledge with significant import for the study of the past. If I have any critique of this work, it is that I would have liked to hear more about the processes that attended the thirty years of (sometimes sporadic) collaboration represented here. Turner makes few comments in the pages of this book about methodology—how informants were selected and approached, how ethnobotanical investigations were conducted, or how negotiations surrounding approvals for the book from various Haida governing bodies were carried out. The preface and early sections of the book comment briefly on who was consulted and hint at the length and considerable shepherding of such work by various Haida political leaders, but a more reflexive account would be welcome. Turner's chosen position as an advocate and friend, as exemplified by the overall tone of the book, may have precluded further delving into such matters. These, however, are timely issues in social research, especially the anthropological disciplines, and much is to be learned about the patience, commitment, honesty, and humility gained by such long-term and successful collaborations between researchers and British Columbia's First Nations.

Turner's social conscience motivates the conclusions of *Plants of Haida Gwaii*. She comments on both the potential for her work to contribute to Haida land claims and other types of negotiations and on the political standpoint of the Haida. “In general, the Haida do not feel that the government, company officials, researchers or environmentalists are adequately voicing their concerns or considering their needs and desires in trying to make decisions related to the land” (p. 214). Part of the response to this lack of satisfaction with outside stakeholders was the development of the Haida Watchman Program in Gwaii Haanas National Park. Barbara Wilson, who has been closely connected with the launch of this program, emphasizes in the epilogue the continued importance of teaching outsiders about Haida culture, including the protection and conservation of the land, water, plants and animals. She says, “As with our language, stories, songs, names and lifestyle, the plants and their uses are very much a part

of what makes us who we are” (p. 217). These words, alongside this impressive body of work, demonstrate a keen awareness that ethnobotanical research exists in an evolving social milieu and has the power to positively influence the relationships between First Peoples, outside researchers, and respective levels of government.

References Cited

- Gold, Captain.
2005 Personal Communication. Conversation and email correspondence about *Plants of Haida Gwaii* and his involvement with Nancy Turner over the last several decades. May to August.

Natasha Lyons

Natasha Lyons is currently doing her PhD at the University of Calgary. Her research is focused on developing a public archaeology program with the Inuvialuit community in the Western Arctic hamlet of Aklavik, NT. Additional research interests include palaeoethnobotany, Northwest Coast archaeology, social complexity, and current discourse on aboriginal issues in North America.

Answers to Crossword (page 30)

Clue	Word
Study of ancient humans	archaeology
Refuse, primarily shells	midden
Site of 2005 CAA's	malaspina
Culturally ____ tree	modified
Sacred tree	cedar
Mischievous bird	raven
Site in southern Vancouver	Marpole
Illustrator Hilary...	Stewart
Island Nation	Haida
Tall carving	totem pole
Face covering for dances	mask
Rock carving or egyptian marking for oil	petroglyph
Man-made item	artifact
Father of BC archaeology	Borden
Skillfully woven containers	basketry
Staple foodsource	salmon
Decimated First Nations, 1800's	smallpox
Reid, "Wild,"...	Bills
Fishing structures	weirs
Animal material, oft carved	antler