

SYMPOSIUM PAPER

Roots in the Past: A History of the Society for Economic Botany

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From its inception in 1958 and constitutional beginning in 1960, a number of objectives, themes, and activities have characterized the Society for Economic Botany. Set up as a cross- and multi-disciplinary society “to foster and to encourage scientific research on the uses of plants and to make the results of such research available to the scientific community through scientific meetings and the publication of a journal,” the Society has been a synthetic, unifying organization with international members from pure and applied sciences, including academia, industry, botanical gardens, and governmental agencies.

Economic Botany, the Society’s adopted quarterly journal, was begun by Edmund H. Fulling at the New York Botanical Garden in 1947. Our strong ties to this organization continue today. Likewise, we continue to hold annual invited symposia on chosen topics, and stay in dormitories when we meet at universities. Except when meeting jointly, our meeting format schedules one presentation at a time to encourage multidisciplinary exchange. Our discussions about education and teaching, begun at the initial organizing conference in 1958, continue today in both tried and new formats. By its interest in plants useful to humans, the Society for Economic Botany has always looked to the future and addressed current issues, yet it maintains strong traditional links with its own beginnings.

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Ecological Ethnobotany Developing

Salick, Jan (Curator of Economic Botany, Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis, Missouri) Ecological Ethnobotany has its roots in traditional ethnobotany while growing with ecology, exploring rich and productive intellectual ground developed within ecology and relevant to ethnobotany. Ecological genetics began with field studies examining the role of environment in genetic selection certainly important to ethnobotany with the human environment bring about domestication, landraces, and genetic variation. More recently, ecological genetics includes the proliferating molecular techniques, which help elucidate obscure evolutionary relationships in ethnobotany. Physiological ecology or autecology allows ethnobotany to investigate the physiological variation within and adaptations of plants important to people. Population ecology is full of import for ethnobotany allowing us to ask questions about plant life cycles, sustainable harvests, and plant reproduction. Plant community ecology can be used to investigate and compare human management of forests and fields. Ecosystem ecology deals with nutrient, carbon, and energy fluxes meaningful for evaluating sustainable management of those same forests and fields. Landscape ecology ties together different ecosystems and different human management, scaled to holistic human interaction with their environment. Global ecology has yet to be addressed convincingly in ethnobotany but remains a tempting goal for the future: what are the global implications of human interactions with plants? As a whole these ecological investigations of plant-people interactions comprise the developing field of ecological ethnobotany: historically rooted in ethnobotany, growing from methodological and theoretical issues in ecology, and ready to flower and fruit with future applications.