

Oral presentation

History, Research and Curation of Harvard University's Economic Botany Collections

Jessica M. Dolan^a

^aHarvard University Herbaria, Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

The Economic Botany Collections at Harvard University have a long history of use for teaching, research, and public education, dating back to 1858. Comprised of at least 15,000 specimens, the collections consist of several smaller collections representing historical and cultural uses of plants around the world. The Economic Botany Collections were utilized and expanded upon by scholars such as Oakes Ames and Richard Evans Schultes, who contributed thousands of specimens related to their work. Though the collections were dismantled from their display in 2003, curatorial staff at Harvard University has been working since 2005 to reassemble them on the top floor of the Harvard Museum of Natural History, so they may continue to be used for research and education. This talk will briefly cover the history of the Economic Botany Collections at Harvard; discuss recent and current uses of the collections for teaching and research; detail current curatorial projects, and explore future prospects for using the collections as educational tools. One goal of the talk is to familiarize scholars with the existence of the Economic Botany Collections at Harvard University, to encourage scholars across disciplines to visit and use these important historical collections. Historical data from the Economic Botany Collections can be utilized for comparative and interdisciplinary studies, exemplifying the lasting benefit of voucher collections. In an era when it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain collection permits, and matters of intellectual property rights have moved to the forefront, historical collections such as the ones at Harvard may contribute surprisingly new information to contemporary studies. They may also aid us in redressing past intellectual property abuses.

Keywords:

Museum, Voucher, Artifact, Ethnobotany, Richard Evans Schultes

Selected References:

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Presenting Author: Jessica M. Dolan, jdolan@oeb.harvard.edu