

## Plains Apache Ethnobotany

By Julia A. Jordan. 2008. University of Oklahoma Press, 2800 Venture Drive, Norman, Oklahoma. 212 pages. 34.95 USD. Cloth.

*Plains Apache Ethnobotany* is a delightful book by retired anthropologist Julia A. Jordan. Based on graduate fieldwork she conducted in the mid-1960s in Oklahoma, the book is dedicated to the memory of the Apache elders she and other students worked with during that period – people with whom she developed a working relationship “interlaced with humour and laughter,” as well as apparent mutual respect and cooperation.

The introduction, where Jordan describes the fieldwork and portrays the elders, is one of the most engaging parts of the book. She introduces Ray Blackbear, who was raised by paternal grandparents from whom he learned the history and folklore of the Apache, as well as details on finding and using native plants. He used to tease Jordan unmercifully about her pronunciation of certain Apache words. Louise Saddleblanket, the daughter of a respected Apache medicine man, pierced the author’s ears with a long, carefully selected prickly pear cactus thorn.

Fred Bigman, who lived near the students’ quarters, would never fail to arrive at 7:00 a.m. for his 8:00 a.m. interview, sometimes accompanied by his wife. Sitting quietly in the kitchen, smoking, drinking coffee, and making small talk, he gave the impression that watching the field school students wake up was a favourite pastime. Rose Chaletsin, a woman of property and stature, was an accomplished storyteller who agreed to tell some of her stories during the summer field season, even though the traditional storytelling period is winter. When the recorded stories were played back, the author reports, Chaletsin laughed heartily. Those personal touches set a pleasant tone for the rest of the book.

Part One, “The Plains Apache,” includes a chapter on Plains Apache history and culture, including the earliest known history of the tribe, nineteenth century developments, the reservation and allotment periods, and finally the twentieth century. The chapter on the Plains Apache plant world was particularly intriguing. I discovered, for example, that plants were not conceptualized by the Apache as distinct entities and that the Apache world view did not divide nature into, for ex-

ample, animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms. The Apache language, writes Jordan, has no equivalent for the English word “plant.” The Apache also conceived of plants as existing in pairs: the “real” plant and an imitation or imitations that resembled the real plant but did not carry its particular properties. Wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), for example, has imitators within members of the same genus (*M. punctata*, *M. citriodora*) that do not carry *fistulosa*’s highly valued scent.

Part Two, “The Useful Plants,” includes chapters on plants used for food, ritual and medicine, material culture and firewood, and personal care and adornment. What struck me about these chapters was the Apache names for these plants – names that reflect practical knowledge or humorous perception. Wild onion, for example, is called “horses won’t eat it” in Plains Apache, while black samson echinacea is named “medicine makes you numb” because it produces a numbing effect on the mouth tissues when chewed. The ram’s horn or unicorn plant is referred to as “old lady’s toenail,” while the puffball is called “coyote penis.”

In some of the previous paragraphs I have used the past tense to echo Jordan’s writing, as well as her assertion, in the concluding chapter, that although this particular ethnobotany is perhaps incomplete, it would be impossible to replicate now because the elders she worked with have passed away. With the loss, in 2008, of the last individual who could speak the language with any fluency, these “custodians of the language and traditional culture” have, in essence, died out. Nevertheless, Jordan points out, these elders left an enduring legacy for subsequent generations – from the preservation of an important part of their traditional knowledge to their belief in how plants and the rest of the natural world, a powerful and awesome force, should be approached, in the author’s words, “with thoughtful, even prayerful, respect.”

*Plains Apache Ethnobotany* is a well-written, easy-to-read and informative account about a different sort of relationship with the natural world. Interlaced with the personal stories, experiences and wisdom of Apache elders, it is a must-read for anyone with an interest in traditional ecological knowledge.

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## Biodiversity Databases: Techniques, Politics and Applications

Edited by G. Curry and C. J. Humphries. 2008. The Systematics Association Special Volume Series 73. CRC Press, Taylor & B Francis Group, New York. 208 pages. 60.95 USD.

This book is meant to fill a gap in biodiversity, data and informatics. The subject is important for minimizing the digital divide and to make best available use of technology for reaching global sustainability,

environmental justice and increasing human and natural wealth. Not a small feat. As European expertise plays a significant role, the one-sided European view unfortunately carries throughout the book.

Regarding taxonomic and biodiversity data, the authors note that many data are not available as they are predominately published in hard copy, if at all.