

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Anthropology Faculty Publications and
Presentations

Anthropology

2004

Book Review of, Plants of Haida Gwaii

Douglas Deur

Portland State University, deur@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anth_fac



Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Deur, D. (2004). Plants of Haida Gwaii, by N.J. Turner. (Winlaw B.C.: Sono Nis Press). In B.C. Studies. 142-43.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

tive. Evenden's arguments are deft, but he could push them further. The floods that were exploited by Fraser advocates were also seized upon by American boosters. A discussion of the different contexts in which these visions played out would underscore the importance of provincial political and economic contexts. Conversely, Evenden's treatment of the impact of the ALCAN project on the Cheslatta T'en is important, but this was anything but an isolated incident. Attention to the regional impact of dams on Native peoples would underscore how tales about salmon expand our understanding of modernity and colonialism. The bias toward the impact of dams on salmon habitat did deflect fish research from concerns about the ocean, but earlier research had bared thorny regulatory issues no government wanted to address, and key oceanographic problems had to await satellite technology.

Fish versus Power is very good history, but it contains a chastening conclusion. British Columbians spared Fraser salmon not because they had great empathy for nature, but because their electrical demands increased only after technological innovations enabled them to exploit the already-devastated Columbia and soon-to-be devastated Peace. This is not the sort of tale that makes readers proud - the just-so stories are much more effective on that score - but this is why Matthew Evenden's book is so important. It reminds us that the frontiers more often constrain our ability to understand and that novel spatial constructs can create original and needed insights into the past and present.



Plants of Haida Gwaii

Nancy J. Turner

Winlaw, BC: Sono Nis Press, 2004.
264 pp. Illus. \$38.95 cloth.

BY DOUGLAS DEUR
University of Washington

FOR THOSE SCHOLARS conducting research within First Nations communities at this postcolonial moment in academic history, old rules do not apply. One must navigate a rearranged landscape made up of new challenges and opportunities. First Nations have both the desire and the ability to restrict researchers' access: they may actively seek to shape both the methods by which research is to be conducted and the manner and degree to which their intellectual property will be manifested in published form. Moreover, many First Nations seek a greater and co-equal role in the academic enterprise, with Aboriginal cultural specialists shaping research goals and questions; unprecedented collaborative research opportunities emerge that, when all runs smoothly, unite indigenous cultural specialists with outside researchers in the production of new and more culturally nuanced genres of academic discourse. Outside researchers must devote unprecedented attention to developing relationships of mutual trust within the communities they study. Research "for research's sake" is seldom admissible, and one must demonstrate convincingly, to an audience jaded by decades of perceived academic misrepresentation, that one's work will lead, for example, to the settlement of land or resource claims, the improvement of community health, or the preservation and perpetuation of cultural knowledge in the face of considerable pressures to the contrary.

BC researchers, seeking models that might help them to navigate this rearranged academic landscape, would benefit greatly from an investigation of the works of Nancy Turner. For over three decades Turner has been in the forefront of developments in collaborative research with First Nations, producing a corpus of ethnobotanical works that is recognized internationally for its detail and its sensitivity to cultural concerns.

In many ways her most recent book, *Plants of Haida Gwaii*, represents the culmination of lessons learned by Dr. Turner in the course of the last three decades and is an effective response to the emergent academic paradigm. A casual skim of this book might lead some readers to assume that it is merely another guide to plants used by an Aboriginal group: the book is beautifully illustrated with colour photos of plants and people as well as paintings by Haida artist Giitsxaa, and it lists species after species of plants that have been used traditionally for their berries, shoots, leaves, woods, or other products. Such "plant guides" are often associated with the popular literature regarding Aboriginal peoples – literature commonly fashioned into paperback guidebooks of mixed merit that provide brisk sales at tourist shops throughout the province. Yet Dr. Turner's works stand apart. As the preface and introduction make clear, this volume represents the outcome of decades of earnest discussions between Turner and the Haida community regarding not only the traditional use of plants but also the role of the researcher in the transmission of cultural knowledge today as well as the competing imperatives for disclosure and privacy that characterize contemporary First Nations research.

Beginning in 1971, very early in her academic career, Turner made her first research trip to Haida Gwaii,

initiating her ethnographic research of Haida plant use and a meticulous review of archival materials on Haida culture. Since then she has continued to visit and revisit this unique place, documenting and participating in Haida plant use traditions that, for a time, seemed to be slipping away. Haida elders, wishing to have their knowledge passed on to later generations, eagerly invited Turner into their homes and out to their families' plant gathering sites, providing the information and perspectives that shaped this impressive, long-term documentation effort.

What Turner has produced with the guidance of these elders is a document that speaks, arguably by design, to two audiences. For contemporary Haida, this volume is a resource of tremendous pedagogic value, providing a detailed chapter of almost forty pages entitled "The Role of Plants in Haida Culture" as well as over 130 pages of information on the traditional uses of particular plant species within the traditional diet, toolkit, and pharmacopoeia of the Haida people. This information provides ample confirmation – one might even say celebration – of the detail and sophistication of traditional Haida plant knowledge in a format that quotes Haida elders at length, provides abundant illustrations, and is attuned to the cultural milieu of the modern Haida; to wit, the volume is an outstanding teaching tool within the Haida community and will long serve the purpose that its elders intended. The perpetuation of dietary and medicinal practices and the continued attachment to places of plant procurement will, in the view of many First Nations elders, provide for the health and cohesion of their descendants far into the future. Long after they are gone, the elders will continue to "speak" to young Haida through the works compiled by Dr. Turner.

Yet clearly this document was designed to speak to outsiders as well. While not provided with intimate details of ceremonial or medicinal plant uses, outside audiences are presented with sufficient information to glimpse the cultural, ceremonial, dietary, and economic importance of plants among the Haida. We, too, are invited to learn from the elders of Haida Gwaii regarding the uses of the myriad plants of the BC coast so that we might also share in this region's bounty. More to the point, however, this book fosters an empathetic appreciation of both Haida culture and the plants on which the Haida have depended since time immemorial. While the book is remarkably thin in explicit political commentary or in discussion of recent land and resource conflicts in Haida Gwaii, it conveys Haida perspectives on these matters, both explicitly and implicitly. These perspectives are perhaps best summarized in the book's brief epilogue, written by K'iiljuus (Barbara Wilson): "Elders teach that respect and thanks for all things are a must. If we do not respect, give thanks and protect these plants – the life-giving travelers that share our journey – they will not be there for us" (217).

As this volume clearly indicates, plants and other non-commercial natural resources are necessary for the survival of the people of Haida Gwaii, individually and collectively, yet forces outside of this archipelago have dramatic impacts on these resources. Logging, overfishing, the spread of introduced species, and many other environmental impacts great and small thus result, indirectly but inexorably, in a cascade of adverse cultural consequences. By gaining an empathetic understanding of Haida land and resource ethics, it is implied, outsiders might be compelled to work in concert with the Haida to protect both

the plants and the cultural practices that depend on them. Turner's work ensures that this message, embodied in a compelling collage of images of the land and quotations from the elders, will reach a broad audience. No doubt the long-term research relationship between Nancy Turner and the Haida will continue to yield dividends, for both academic researchers and First Nations communities, for many years to come.

Greenpeace: How a Group of Ecologists, Journalists and Visionaries Changed the World

Rex Weyler

Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2004.
600 pp. Illus. \$39.95 cloth.

BY MICHAEL M'GONIGLE
University of Victoria

VANCOUVER IN THE EARLY 1970S was a far different place from the "world class" cosmopolis it is today. Home to "draft dodgers" and a Kitsilano counterculture, it was an open space for environmental action, like a green field before the grass got all trampled down. This is the setting for the birth of Greenpeace, recounted in Rex Weyler's exciting new book entitled *Greenpeace: How a Group of Ecologists, Journalists and Visionaries Changed the World*.

The book recounts how the now global organization got started – from the founding of the Greenpeace predecessor (the Don't Make a Wave Committee) in 1969 and the initial campaign (in 1971) of the *Greenpeace I* to Amchitka Island to protest American nuclear testing, through campaigns to save the whales and seals, to the creation of Greenpeace International in 1979. It hosts an engrossing cast of characters,