

Ancient pathways, ancestral knowledge

AMY REISWIG

Nancy Turner's monumental new work explores humanity's multi-faceted relationship to plants.

When she was nine years old, Nancy J. Turner was involved with the junior wing of the Victoria Natural History Society and spent Saturdays hiking, observing, and talking about discoveries. Now in her 60s, she's still doing much the same thing, but as one of Canada's leading ethnobotanists, a Distinguished Professor in Environmental Studies at UVic, holder of the Hakai Chair in Ethnobotany, member of the Order of BC and the Order of Canada, and an award-winning author. And her passion for the natural world remains undiminished.

Having already authored numerous books, her new *Ancient Pathways, Ancestral Knowledge: Ethnobotany and Ecological Wisdom of Indigenous Peoples of Northwestern North America* (McGill-Queen's, June 2014), blends that child's deep love of nature with rigorous academic research to reveal the complex and captivating history of people-plant interrelationships in this region.

This monumental work consists of two volumes—*The History and Practice of Indigenous Plant Knowledge* and *The Place and Meaning of Plants in Indigenous Cultures and Worldviews*. Together, they total well over 1000 pages, necessary to address such vast territory (from Southern Alaska, throughout BC and down to northern Oregon) over vast time—from the late Pleistocene to today. They collect not just Turner's wisdom from over 45 years of study, research, travel and collaboration but the cumulative wisdom of First Nations living here for millennia.

An ethnobotanist who has spent decades working with Indigenous knowledge-keepers all across BC, Turner's work integrates botany and anthropology as well as geography, ecology and linguistics. In her new work, she also incorporates "lines of evidence" from other integrative fields of study, some of which you've probably never heard of: ethnobiology, archaeobotany, palaeoecology, palaeoethnobotany and phytogeography among others. Her synthesis and conclusions are fascinating and sometimes surprising.

Take the example of western red cedar, iconic of the BC coast. Turner tells us that the palaeoecological record shows western red cedar only became common here about 5000 to 4000 years ago, well after humans had begun inhabiting the region. Combining that palaeoecology with historical linguistics, she observes: "The proliferation of terms for cedar tree, cedar wood, cedar bark, and cedar branches in virtually every language where this tree grows today shows that it was soon widely embraced by First Peoples everywhere. The Ts'msyen names, meaning 'real wood,' are one indication of its importance."

She also shows how social groups are affected, even determined, by plant resources, noting that the red cedar's availability allowed "for the construction of large post and plank houses and oceangoing canoes" and, therefore, "the development of large, diverse, and stratified societies." And in an example of the kinship/ecology/philosophical worldview, she cites the "words of praise" a young Kwakwaka'wakw woman



Dr Nancy Turner

speaks to a cedar tree before harvesting its bark for such uses as rope, clothing, and baskets: "Look at me, friend! I come to ask for your dress." (I know I'll never see our provincial tree quite the same way again.)

"If people achieve an understanding they didn't have before, that would make me happy," the bubbly-voiced and always-on-the-go Turner tells me by phone on one of her many trips. Her word "understanding" is key, for her goal is not just to share information but to make clear why this information is so valuable.

So it is that we learn about some very common plants with uncommonly long and important roles to play in the lives of early and contemporary people. For example, while many have heard of the eulachon highway used by peoples trading in eulachon grease, Turner points to the lesser known and much older "kelp highway" followed by ancient, maritime-dependent peoples down the Pacific Rim and even to South America—areas that were possibly

never fully glaciated during the Pleistocene.

We learn how the availability of plant nutrients played a huge role in the migration of ancient people, but also how, over time, communities took root and so did gardens and other specifically cultivated plant resources that were integral to everything from seasonal travels to social relationships and organization, trade networks, and more.

Turner thus gives voice to specific peoples' techniques, like Nuxalk matriarch Mrs Joshua Moody who, in the 1920s, was still practicing her family's tradition of cultivating springbank clover (a favoured root vegetable), picking the roots and planting them in soft sand where the tide comes in around April.

In other cases, Turner listens to what the land itself tells and translates it for us. Like when, during construction related to the Golden Ears Bridge, the remains of a 3500-year-old wapato ("swamp potato") garden were unearthed, remains that spoke of harvesting, processing and resource management that stretched back millennia.

A more visible example to those of us in Victoria are Garry oak woodlands and bright-blooming camas meadows, created by Coast Salish people over generations through weeding, seeding, harvesting and burning. The practice of light-impact burning was, unfortunately, disparaged by white colonizers who had a vested interest in overlooking or outright negating sophisticated indigenous land management practices. By so doing they could declare the area in a "state of nature," the people's activity as not labour, and therefore the land as "unowned"—and free for the taking.

Turner shows how failure to recognize these managed plant relationships had very real impacts on legal issues like land access. She cites a letter from three Kitamaat Haisla leaders to BC's chief commissioner of lands and works in 1897 petitioning for reinstatement of crabapple gardens as part of their reserve lands—plants essential to them for food (including a valued feast food) and medicine, but seen as useless by

Getting the most out of summer

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white Europeans. The fact that the reserve system failed to acknowledge First Nations land management, cultivation and resource use meant “communities were left without their gardens, their pharmacies, their hardware centres, and their sacred places,” writes Turner.

In a hopeful step forward, what is often now called Traditional Land and Resource Management is finally gaining the recognition it deserves and is changing inaccurate perceptions of First Peoples. Turner writes: “The stereotypical ‘hunter-gatherer’ paradigm is being increasingly challenged as more becomes known of Indigenous peoples’ often subtle but sometimes quite obvious ecological manipulations of species.”

Therefore, these two books don't just offer a treasure trove of interesting facts, stories and tables of plant use, but highlight their far-reaching implications, both local and global. She notes that “Locally, regionally, and internationally, humanity is facing unprecedented losses of languages and place-based cultural knowledge—including botanical knowledge—held by Indigenous and other long-resident peoples.”

Indigenous wisdom is part of what she calls our “collective human heritage” and of great importance to us all. As she puts it to me: “In cities, we get the wrong idea of what we need and depend on for life. We think it's what we make for each other, but it's what we get from the natural world.” What is called Traditional Ecological Knowledge therefore offers a model for shifting our values “to create better, more respectful, more meaningful, and more careful relationships with our local environments, with other species, and with the natural world on which we rely.”

So despite lamenting losses, Turner celebrates cultural resilience and hope for the future, presenting a series of concrete strategies for long-term biocultural conservation. In fact, resilience is a key concept of her work. During her early academic studies in the 1960s, she says, “over and over again I got the message that at that time that knowledge wasn't being passed on in the usual way. There were so many pressures against that knowledge being maintained. They could see that that loss would be a tragedy. I was told: ‘It will all be gone in ten years.’ Well, here I am in 2014,” she laughs, “still learning from these amazing people, and I think it's stronger now than it was then.”

Far too humble to see herself in the light of the knowledge-keepers she so admires, Turner instead identifies herself as more of a bridging role. “There have to be people who are bridging that gap and trying to reach some mutual understanding—people who have experience of both worlds,” she says.

Written from a deep love and respect for both people and plants, and an obvious desire for global human cooperation in the face of environmental planetary peril, Turner's message, through over 1000 pages, is simple: “We have to find ways to look after each other.”



Writer and editor Amy Reiswig has also read Turner's *Saanich Ethnobotany: Culturally Important Plants of the WSÁNEC People* (with Richard J. Hebda, 2012) and is not at all surprised to learn that her 1995 Royal BC Museum handbook *Food Plants of Coastal First Peoples* still sells around 800 copies a year.

Triangle Healing Products can help you enjoy every ounce of nutrition and good taste of summer's fresh produce with their Green Star Juicer, Sedona Food Dehydrator, and Blendtec Blender.

Owner Diane Regan refers to these small appliances as investments, because the high quality juicer, food dehydrator and blender are not only reliable and effective, but they will last for years.

Come in to Triangle Healing Products for a demo. The Green Star Juicer is the only juicer that results in no pulp in the juice and no juice in the pulp. Twin gears drive the unique three-stage process: it crushes, mixes and presses. No food is wasted. The design of the Green Star Elite Juicer is actually based on nature's own masticating system—the twin gears mimic the way that your own teeth break down food by slicing and cutting.

After every demo, Diane says, “People are blown away by the taste of the juice, and by the quality.” She describes how people come by first thing in the morning for a demonstration, enjoy a glass of juice from the Green Star Juicer, and then return to Triangle after work to buy the juicer. “They can't believe that they aren't hungry because that morning glass of nutritious juice filled them up.” A bonus is that the quality of the juice is such that it will last 72 hours.

The leftover pulp can be added to muffin recipes or placed on trays in the Sedona Raw Food Dehydrator to make crackers. Your dehydrator will not be running for hours to extract any excess juice as your juicer has already done that.

The Sedona Raw Food Dehydrator is compact and safe—it never overheats above the set temperature. Also very convenient, the dehydrator has a built-in timer for up to 99 hours. Eco-friendly features include quiet dual fans, energy efficiency, and an ability to divide the drying chamber to half size.

If you are looking for one multipurpose appliance, come in for a demo of the Blendtec Blender, a blender that combines aesthetics with quality and function. It fits under most cabinetry, with its slender size meaning a small footprint—and one of the four available colours is sure to complement your kitchen décor. The Blendtec blender does the job of many different appliances: meat grinder, latte machine, bread mixer, ice cream maker, grain mill, coffee grinder, whole juicer and milkshake mixer. And the blender stays cool when being used.

Besides the nutritious bounty supplied by summer, its warm weather draws us outdoors. Don't forget to wear Barefoot Science Insoles or Juil or Get Grounded sandals to keep your feet happy, and to drink lots of clean, pH-balanced water. The Kenrico Alkaline Water Stick will fit in any thermos or water bottle.

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Clockwise from top left: Green Star Elite Juicer, Blendtec Blender, Sedona Raw Food Dehydrator