
The publication of Mayo Ethnobotany deserves our celebration. Combining field observations, library and herbarium research, authors Yetman and Van Devender pooled their resources to produce a comprehensive portrait of the geology, geography, history, language, culture and botany of the Mayos, an indigenous people of northwestern Mexico. As with many other cultures, Mayo traditional knowledge is rapidly being lost as the people are absorbed into modern Mexico.

The authors, who started out working in the Río Mayo region independently and explored the land for several years unbeknownst to each other, spent six years studying the Mayo region, though their studies continue. They had previously lived and worked in the Sonoran Desert for decades, and their attention was drawn to Río Mayo because the “desert dwindles away and merges into more tropical” systems.

The book’s contents are divided into two sections. Part one consists of a description of the people and the land, a brief ethnography of the Mayos, their history, and an overview of plant and animal life. That section concludes with an extended portrayal of “Eight Plants that Make Mayos Mayos,” nominated because they are known to all, and integral to Mayo life.

Part two, the second half the book, is devoted to an annotated list of plants arranged alphabetically by plant family. The list appears to be complete, both in species listed, and usage. The botanical descriptions are detailed and picturesque, and special attention is given to information about habitat. Culinary, medicinal and veterinary use, industrial, construction, artifact, and every other human use are relayed. Non-native crop species are included when they make a significant contribution to the cash economy of the growers. Hence, we learn that many Mayos plant ajonjoli (sesame) as a cash crop. Thousands of acres of ajonjoli are planted in the Mayo region and almost all of the seeds are sold in the international market. They are accustomed to “interplant beans, squash and, above all, watermelon,” a practice that reminds this writer of a similar list of species intercropped with sesame in the Wadi Hadhramaut region of Yemen.

Care was taken to present supplemental documentary records. A number of informative black and white illustrations are scattered through the volume. Six Appendices offer data that may be useful to future researchers: Mayo region place names and their meanings; Yoreme consultants; Gazetteer of the Mayo region; Mayo plants listed by Spanish names; Mayo plants listed by Mayo name; and Glossary of Mayo and Spanish terms. A dozen pages of notes at the end of the book provide elaboration of specific facts. Another dozen pages devoted to a thorough index follow a five-page bibliography. Affordable and easy to read and to use, it should be added to every professional’s library.

DANIEL F. AUSTIN, BOOK REVIEW EDITOR

BOOK REVIEWS


This book has a title that perfectly summarizes the contents—Imprecipid Balance. There has never been the mythical “perfect balance” between humans and their environment, and the multiple contributors to this fascinating summary of precolombian humans and landscapes in the Americas document the facts as now known.

David Lentz provides the introduction (pp. 1–12) where he gives the “definitions and conceptual underpinnings” of the book, and the final summary and conclusions (pp. 493–506). In between, 20 contributors produced the 15 chapters that discuss climate (David A. Hodell, Mark Brenner and Jason H. Curtis, pp. 13–38), floristic regions (Andrew M. Greller, pp. 39–88), food webs (Lentz, pp. 89–120), and various people from the Mississippi River valley to the tropical Andes and lower Amazon. Emily McClung de Tapia (pp. 121–146) discusses prehispanic agricultural systems in the Basin of Mexico. Charles S. Spenser (147–178) details water management and agriculture in Mexico and Venezuela. Nicholas Dunning and Timothy Beach (pp. 179–202) tell of both stability and instability in prehispanic Mayan landscapes. Charles M. Peters (pp. 203–224) outlines silviculture and indigenous management of Neotropical forests. Gayle J. Fritz (225–250) provides insight into the native farming systems in the Mississippi River Valley. Suzanne K. Fish (251–280) tells of Hohokam impacts on the Sonoran Desert.