Talking Books: A New Method of Returning Ethnobiological Research Documentation to the Non-Literate. —Ethnobotanists and anthropologists often give training tools and/or documentation of their results back to the communities where they have worked. In this way, they help preserve the communities’ knowledge as a part of a social contract and ethical guidelines. However, such an endeavor can be quite difficult with largely non-literate groups. Attempts to use pictures and diagrams to convey this information to the community members work well, but only up to a point. With just pictures, it is difficult to represent complex and abstract ideas like names, emotions, and relationships. Using a combination of off-the-shelf products, I have constructed what I call “Talking Books,” which are water-resistant, solar-rechargeable picture books that use short audio clips to explain—in the users’ native language and voices—the concept(s) represented by each picture. “Readers” can listen to the clips by pressing a button next to each picture. These books are effective tools for capturing and preserving traditional knowledge. By returning the knowledge in the form of these solar-powered books to remote, non-literate communities that lack electricity, the books also stimulate renewed interest in the community’s own traditional knowledge.

Background. While studying the ethnobotany of the Asháninka community of Paititi in Ucayali (Peru) and the Malinke of Kita (Western Mali), I recorded many plant uses with my collaborators. Both groups requested that I return to them some documentation of this research, such as a list of plants and their uses with photos for use as a reference within their community. Books with pictures, names, uses, and preparations of the communities’ useful plants were given to literate members of the communities, which in Paititi, is about 15 of the 29 people and in Kita, less than half of the 15 Malinke collaborators. However, this effort was useless to the rest of the community who could not read these books, who only spoke their unwritten native language of Asháninka or Bambara (and not the written Spanish or French), and who had no members of their family who could read. There are small schools in both communities that teach local children reading, writing, arithmetic, and agriculture, but many of the adults were living in the villages before the school was built, and so they had never learned these skills. In addition, many of their children are too young to have learned reading yet or have little interest in reading long lists of plant uses.

Returning research results or other benefits to the communities that ethnobiologists work with can take many forms (1). In the past, laminated sheets of plant photos and names were used as a way to give back weatherproof documentation to the communities (2, 3). This is a method that works well if the users are literate. Alexiades et al. (4) produced a book for the Ese Eja of Peru and Bolivia that has transcriptions of Ese Eja songs and mythology in Spanish and Ese Eja. However, this type of documentation can be difficult to produce if the written form of newly studied languages is variable or lacking. In their two books, Fruit Trees of the Forest in the Lives of Amazonians (5), which describes forest ecology, and Recipes without Words: Medicinal Plants of Amazonia (6), which gives medicinal plant remedies, these authors used largely nonverbal, easily understood images to try to convey complex concepts to non-literate communities, giving these books widespread appeal (7, 8). Yet, the abstract concepts of emotions, relations, and local names are difficult to convey without the use of some language, so a book that can literally speak the names and concepts to its “readers” was needed. Books with automatic or manual playback of associated audio clips have been used for some time in the teaching of reading skills (9) and for training people with developmental disabilities (10), but this relatively simple technology has not been applied in the past in anthropological work, where it can work to a great advantage.

Methodology. I considered several ways to represent plant uses by employing audio or im-

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