
Deborah Pearsall sets three objectives for her book. She presents an ethnobotanical account of the 3,600 year archaeological record of the Jama River Valley in Ecuador’s Manabi Province, synthesizes 10 years of research in the region, and illustrates the paleoethnobotanical research process. The monograph is written in a style accessible “to undergraduates and beginning graduate students (p. xiv)” and follows William Strunk and E. B. Whites’ admonition to use the active. Despite what many of us were taught, the active voice is more accurate and easier to read. Use of the first person singular makes Pearsall’s work is a joy to read. It indeed is accessible to undergraduates, but anyone interested in tropical archeology and ethnobotany will find it to be a useful reference.

The book begins with a short section that describes the nature of ethnobotanical research. Section two describes fieldwork in the Jama River Valley, while the next section discusses the plant-people relationships. Emanating throughout the text is how Dr. Pearsall and her research team have successfully integrated contemporaneous ethnobotanical studies with the archaeological record. Patterns of modern plant use help to fill gaps in the archeological record while the latter provides a context and historical root for current practices.

Through analyses of macroremains, pollen, and phytoliths, Pearsall identified 67 plant taxa (omitting wood) along with 14 morpho-types and 39 unknowns in the archaeological record. These data are significant. They also illustrate the limitations of paleoethnobotany. The Ecuadorian Shuar use at least 600 plant species (Bennett et al. 2002). Although the Shuar inhabit a more diverse region of the country, an ethnoflora of 300–400 species would not be surprising for the Jama River Valley. Pearsall claims that, “Paleoethnobotanists can learn much about medicinal plant use by analyzing pollen and phytoliths in coprolites . . . ” (p. 6). I suspect that many would disagree. Evidence of a few commonly used plants may be preserved but traditional tropical cultures often have pharmacopoeias of several hundred species. Medicinal latex, sap, resins, and filtered decoctions leave no clues for the archaeologist.

An unfortunate problem in this text (and many others) is taxonomic mistakes. For example, Table 3.1 has eight binomials that are either synonyms, misspelled or assigned to old families. For example, Ceiba, Eriotheca, Pseudobombax are members of the Malvaceae not Bombacaceae. The epithet for Erythrina poeppigiana is misspelled and Acacia pellacantha should be Acacia macracantha.