

The ethics of engagement: An

Kelly Bannister examines the ethics of engagement when an academic studies the traditional knowledge of an indigenous community

“**Y**ou’ve taken everything. Our land. Our language. Our culture. And now you want to take the only thing we have left—our medicines.” The room was silent. The First Nations elder who had just spoken turned to me and said, in a gentler voice, “I don’t mean you, personally.”

Then she held up a book, a field guide of plants in the region with information on Aboriginal plant use. “At the same time,” the elder continued, “I am thankful for this book. I learn so much about my culture that was taken away, because of the kind of work you scientists do.”

It was over a decade ago but I have a vivid recollection of those words, spoken at my first community elders meeting. I had come to explain my doctoral research plans to look at anti-microbial properties of traditional foods and medicines as part of a collaborative ethno-botany project with the Secwepemc First Nation in British Columbia. I left knowing that something I needed to learn was not going to be found in the laboratory or my coursework—how my medicinal plant research was situated within broader social and political contexts, how it might contribute to consequences that I didn’t intend, and how I was going to deal with this.

I came to see it as the ethnobiologist’s dilemma—how do you promote the importance and interconnections of biological and cultural diversity without facilitating erosion of the very relationships that you seek to protect? What are the ethics of community engagement for the ethnobiologist whose work involves indigenous peoples’ traditional plant knowledge and resources? I hung up my lab coat temporarily to find answers to these “side questions” that arose in my doctoral studies in the mid-1990s. Little did I know how much dust my lab coat would gather as I pursued my query.

I had set out in the natural sciences but migrated unintentionally to the social sciences and humanities in search of answers to the ethical, legal, and political aspects of the science I was undertaking. The migration happened part way through my PhD program in a botany department, leading to some interesting complications. I recall one faculty member taking me aside after a departmental seminar I had given. “Don’t get me wrong,” she said, “we recognize your work is important. It’s just that we are *botanists*, we don’t know anything about *humans*.”

While I chuckled about the irony, I understood the professor’s point—the scope of my medicinal plant research had expanded into philosophy and anthropology—beyond the confines and comfort level of the faculty expertise in botany. This posed a real problem of who could judge my work against the departmental criteria to know if it was worthy of a botany degree.

But the comment was also troublesome. I wondered how botanists—any scientist—could consider their research sufficiently removed from ethical, legal, and political implications to completely set aside these aspects as topics for other disciplines.

Unintended consequences may be an unavoidable fact of scien-

tific life, but it is a reality that ethnobiologists can no longer afford to overlook, largely due to reactions to intensive bio-prospecting efforts in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. Bio-prospecting is the search for new and useful products from nature’s biological diversity, usually with commercial intent. The medicinal plant knowledge of indigenous peoples is sometimes used by bio-prospectors to select plants of interest. Some ethnobiologists have partnered directly with biotechnology or pharmaceutical companies in bio-prospecting ventures. Despite attempts to address important issues such as prior informed consent, benefit sharing, and intellectual property rights, few of these ventures have escaped harsh criticism amid the intensive global debates and political outcry against cultural misappropriation and breaches of indigenous rights.

More commonly, medicinal plant knowledge is accessed *indirectly* through the ethno-biological literature, which is over a century old. The late Dr. Darrell Posey, a noted ethnobiologist and indigenous rights proponent, raised serious ethical issues about unregulated, third-party use of information in the “public domain,” which is generally considered open to free and unfettered use. Of concern is that much of the cultural information found there was not published with the consent or even the awareness of the original keepers of the knowledge. Clearly this is not consistent with the ethical standards of today’s research involving humans, yet there is no adequate mechanism to regulate use of such information after publication. Indigenous communities across the world, consequently, have been put in the position of contesting patent applications related to their traditional plant uses, copyright over associated stories, and trademarks over use of indigenous names and designs.

Posey blamed a lack of relationship between researchers and traditional knowledge holders for facilitating the commodification of the sacred, which led to cultural harms beyond the conceptual framework of Western society. He challenged researchers in the ethno-sciences to develop higher levels of awareness and commitment to respect and protect indigenous rights and cosmologies in

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research. His work inspired vigorous intellectual and political debate on research ethics and intellectual property rights, particularly related to the appropriation of traditional knowledge, but also applicable more generally to research involving communities.

Many indigenous knowledge keepers face a difficult situation today. Where cultural modes of knowledge transmission have been devastated by colonization, the choice may be either to

ethnobiologist's perspective



share traditional knowledge with outsiders such as academics and risk misappropriation or take the knowledge to the grave. One of my mentors, the late Secwepemc elder Dr. Mary Thomas, was acutely aware of this dilemma.

Thomas was internationally known for her commitment to her culture and the environment. During fieldwork involving yellow avalanche lilies, an important traditional food and medicine that is decreasing in productivity owing to habitat destruction, she said: “The way I see it, the more people who see and admire one of these [lilies], the better chance of preserving it.”

Yet, in a presentation at the *Protecting Knowledge Conference* in 2000 at the University of British Columbia, she lamented how elders today “are afraid to share, especially the medicines, because we know there is a money-making business out there. That’s not what we want to teach.” Thomas embedded the knowledge she shared and her teachings in cultural values—foremost was her respect for the connections between all living things. “My concern today is the welfare of my people our connection with Mother Nature that’s our spirituality. I don’t go in the woods to gather plant medicine without offering a gift. I walk in and I pray, before I touch anything.... I know what I do if I destroy Mother Nature’s gifts. I am destroying myself, my children, my grandchildren’s future, which is very precious to me.”

Thomas helped scientists like me understand that cultural knowledge and associated biodiversity will not be preserved, ultimately, through research papers, photographs, or herbarium specimens, although these educational resources can be helpful. “Keeping the knowledge living” needs to be the goal, which

requires supporting the vitality and integrity of the people and cultures from which the knowledge originates.

This sentiment is embodied by the International Society of Ethnobiology and its code of ethics, which recognizes the interconnections of culture and language to land and territory—and that cultural and linguistic diversity are inextricably linked to biological diversity. Posey co-founded the society in 1988 as a forum for scientists and indigenous peoples to come together for constructive dialogue and action on protecting bio-cultural diversity.

It was Posey whom I nervously contacted in 1996 as a naïve graduate student, seeking to address my dilemma. He didn’t tell me what to do, as I had hoped—he challenged me to get involved. Ironically, the code of ethics that Posey initiated a decade and a half earlier was completed during my term as chair of the society’s ethics committee in 2006.

I believe Posey’s vision was to foster the same “ethical space” that is promoted by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research’s new *Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples*. It is my hope that with this “common space of reflection and dialogue between cultures” now recognized as a necessary part of academe, we can cultivate the mindfulness needed to address the ethnobiologists’ dilemma. It wasn’t something I learned at the university, but maybe it will be for graduate students in future. **AM**

Kelly Bannister is director of the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance and an adjunct professor in the School of Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria.