

Maria Fadiman: Ethnobotanist



Deep in an Ecuadoran rainforest, monkeys overhead and poisonous snakes underfoot, Dr. Maria Fadiman

goes to work. “It looks like one big, green **mishmash** to me, but the people who live here can single out the right plants for medicine, or the one to eat if you cut out the little part in the very center. Each house is made entirely from the forest—the poles that hold it up, the floors, the thatch on the walls, the vines that tie it, the palm leaf sleeping mats, the baskets, everything. It’s strong, it’s waterproof, it works, and it’s all done in a way that’s in balance with nature.”

That balance is at the center of Fadiman’s research. As an ethnobotanist, she studies how people interact with plants. “Looking at conservation without including people in the equation is a fantasy,” she says. “So the focus of my work is finding a balance where people use resources in a sustainable way that allows **flora** and **fauna** to remain intact.”

At her field site in Ecuador, Fadiman studies **sustainable** and non-sustainable methods used to collect fiber plants and palms. Collecting plants for fiber can involve cutting down entire trees or just the specific parts of plants that will be used. Fadiman’s data reveals where and why such differences exist

in Ecuador’s rainforests. In many cases, no written record of plant knowledge exists. Recognizing this, Fadiman’s first effort is to record all the information that local people can provide.

In the field, Fadiman eats, sleeps, works, and collects native plants with local families. “When I come all this way because I think their information is important, it generates local excitement. Suddenly plant knowledge is valued.” Whether sitting around a cook fire, walking through mud to brush her teeth in the river, or trying to do some basket weaving, she treasures both the information and experiences she gathers.

An assistant professor in the Department of Geosciences at Florida Atlantic University, she says, “I want to make fieldwork real to my students. If they can picture the little girl who always comes to the river with me instead of a statistic, it will mean much more. I hope my work will change even a small part of the general consciousness.”

