

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Indigenous Knowledge and Development: Livelihoods, Health Experiences and Medicinal Plant Knowledge in a Mexican Biosphere Reserve by Elizabeth A. Olson

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means the book will be of considerable interest to a diverse scholarly audience in the fields of Mexican studies, alcohol and food history, heritage and tourism, and cultural studies of globalisation, authenticity and craft/artisan food movements. The engagement with the critical idea of *lo mexicano* would also make the book an interesting and imaginative way to introduce students to Mexican history and culture. Ultimately, it is hard to disagree with Gaytán's conclusion that studying '[c]ommodities like tequila mark the passing of time and capture change in motion ... They are dynamic, like the spirit of a nation' (p. 160).

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Elizabeth A. Olson, *Indigenous Knowledge and Development: Livelihoods, Health Experiences and Medicinal Plant Knowledge in a Mexican Biosphere Reserve* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), pp. xviii + 181, £49.95; \$80.00, hb.

Elizabeth Olson's book reports the findings of her doctoral studies and particularly her field research, which was undertaken with the inhabitants of indigenous Nahua communities in and around the Sierra of Manantlán Biosphere Reserve (SMBR), close to the southwest Pacific coast of Mexico in northern Colima and southern Jalisco. The aim of Olson's research was to enhance our understanding of the links between biodiversity conservation and sustainable development, and socio-economic profile, health, and medicinal plant knowledge', asking 'to what extent do economic activities and past illness experiences explain the differences in knowledge of medicinal plants held by members of the same cultural group?' (p. 1). Her central hypothesis, supported by her findings, was that, on average, individuals living in communities where agricultural crop production was the main economic activity would have greater medicinal plant knowledge than those living in communities where this was not the case (see pp. 5 and 147).

The introduction sets out the study aims, research questions and key variables as well as the structure of the volume, before explaining the fieldwork process. This prepares the ground for chapters 2 and 3 to provide an introduction to the geography and cultural history of the SMBR, and the influence of sustainable development (SD) and biodiversity conservation (BC) policy and practice on the lived realities of the three study communities. Just as one starts to gain entry into these lived realities, chapter 4 switches focus to review the quantitative research methods available for the anthropological study of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and the influence of political-economic systems. This review is meticulous if rather dense and leads to some tentative claims about possible connections between TEK, market integration and biodiversity conservation. However I thought the chapter disrupted the narrative flow of the book.

Chapter 5 returns to the theme of natural resource management in protected areas, describing how the SMBR is constituted and governed before chapter 6 offers us some examples of the ways in which SD and BC activities are undertaken in the Reserve. These examples are discussed in terms of the socio-political dynamics of decision-making and accountability. Very little of what I read in these two chapters was really what I expected to find. Despite discussion of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, the book contains very little 'thick description' of the lives of the study communities' inhabitants to help us understand their behaviour.

Many of the insights contained within the book are hidden away in rather dense discussions of related secondary publications, but the key results come in chapter 8 (pp. 132–7). As well as supporting the central hypothesis of her research, Olson indicates that there is not a simple relationship between levels of modernisation in a community and medicinal plant knowledge, many aspects of cultural, social, ecological and economic interactions influence the distribution of specialised cultural knowledge. Chapter 8 also sets out a number of additional possible explanations of the research findings and raises some very interesting questions, including why certain people are more familiar with certain plants. Underlying the research seems to be an easy acceptance of simple economic explanations of knowledge and behaviour that inform market-based conservation strategies such as ‘Payments for Ecosystem Services’ mechanisms, increasingly favoured in international policy and a central plank of forest conservation policy in Mexico. Thus it is refreshing to read that the author notes increasing unease with neoliberal environmental policies, even if we only get to this point 11 pages from the end of the volume.

The final chapter opens with a vignette describing the establishment and subsequent abandonment (within five years) of a traditional medicine clinic in the most isolated and marginalised of the study communities. Olson sees the fate of the clinic as allegorical, symbolic of the fate of many community-based development projects, and valuable in deconstructing past attempts at ‘win-win’ development projects. Rather than ‘win-win’ scenarios local SD projects, suggests Olson, are better framed as sets of ‘trade-offs and hard choices’ (p. 141). In concluding her book, she characterises four sets of tensions that any SD project must negotiate: scale, what is relevant and appropriate seen from the national viewpoint may well lack coherence with local livelihoods and lived realities; context, social and historical contexts impact how projects are perceived and received; pluralism, to be successful, projects must leave room for people to explore other options; complexity, people’s lives are complex and changing, so SD projects require flexibility.

While I have no doubt that Olson’s work has helped us to understand better the complexity of relationships among livelihoods, health and medicinal plant knowledge and that her research suggests important additional avenues of enquiry, it will be clear from the above that I found this book problematic in a number of ways. Intellectually, I thought the book lacked a critical appreciation of ‘development’ and ‘sustainable development’, especially in policies aimed at the modernisation of marginalised indigenous communities. Development and conservation should have been problematised at the outset and this would have allowed the ‘resistance’ to SD projects revealed in the field to be contextualised.

The book is also poorly structured and chapters do not hang together well. Part of the reason for this is likely the fact that four of the nine chapters were previously published as journal articles, which have not been stitched together very successfully or integrated into the narrative flow. Finally, the book falls well short in terms of copy editing; it is littered with grammatical errors and syntactic infelicities. There are incorrect and missing references and there are at least two examples of significant repetition, not just of topics but of complete passages of text (cf. p. 93). One can only imagine that the author was pressed to put this book together to meet some target or other. It is not an easy read and does not have the feel of a carefully crafted monograph.

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