

UCLA
Electronic Green Journal

Title

Keeping It Living: Traditions of Plant Use and Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/01f181dq>

Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(24)

Author

Webster, Anthony K.

Publication Date

2006

DOI

10.5070/G312410692

Peer reviewed

Review: Keeping It Living: Traditions of Plant Use and Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America
By Douglas Duer and Nancy Turner (Eds.)

Reviewed by [Anthony K. Webster](#)
Southern Illinois University, USA

.....
Douglas Duer and Nancy Turner (Eds.). *Keeping It Living: Traditions of Plant Use and Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. 384 pp. ISBN: 0-295-98512-7. US \$ 50.00 cloth.

Contrary to popular wisdom, Northwest Coast Native Americans were doing far more than fishing; they were actively managing the lands around them. This is the argument made by the authors included in *Keeping It Living*. For many years, the Northwest Coast has stood as both an enigma and a prototype. It was an enigma in the sense that there were large sedentary populations without obvious agriculture. It was a prototype, in that it was used as evidence that sedentary lifestyles do not equal agriculture. The latter may still be true, but the former argument has been seriously damaged by this collection of essays. Of particular interest are Wayne Suttles' excellent article on "incipient agriculture" among the Coast Salish; James McDonald's piece on Tsimshian horticulture, Madonna L. Moss's piece on Tlingit horticulture, and Douglas Duer's piece on gardening among Northwest Coast peoples. The use of fire or the repeated uses of berry patches all suggest an intentional management of the environment, the use of inland areas for the procurement of foodstuffs. It was not just the sea or the rivers (though rivers could be used for gardening).

Also of import is the idea of ownership of land, or "resource holdings." In this regard, the essay by Nancy J. Turner, Robin Smith, and James T. John outlines in great detail the ways that Northwest Coast people organized land "ownership." As Duer and Turner point out in their insightful introduction, anthropologists, geographers, linguists, and the like missed the nascent agriculture that was occurring among Northwest Coast peoples, precisely because they were predisposed to see agriculture as something else—something that fit a Western model (we should be wary of such self-identification). This book argues, convincingly in my mind, that we need to understand the agricultural/horticultural practices of peoples on their terms, before we make blanket claims about how and if they manage their ecosystems.

On a final note, the bibliography is quite good, but there is much in the way of oral literature of the Northwest Coast that suggests nascent agriculture. For example, consider the collections of Native language texts and re-analysis of those texts based on form and content variation by Melville Jacobs, Dell Hymes, Jarold Ramsey, M. Dale Kinkade, and Robert Bringhurst. These scholars have focused most closely on Haida, Chinook, Salish, Taklema, Tillamook, and Nez Perce (among others). Here we find something of the suggestiveness of the ways that Northwest Coast narrators and narratives are also articulations of ethno geographical and environmental knowledge. Attentions to the narrative traditions of the Northwest Coast peoples are a valuable resource for the investigation of ecological practices.

More work, obviously, needs to be done—but this is a valuable start. I recommend this book for anyone interested in the emerging field of ecological/anthropological management in the Northwest Coast by Native peoples.

.....

Anthony K. Webster, Ph.D., Department of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4502 TEL: 618-453-5027.