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MEMORIAL

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Secoya Ethnobotany: A New Science in the Ecuadorian Amazon

In the 1990s, botany and anthropology students at the Catholic University of Ecuador took classes about the country's medicinal plants. The professor—a botanist—gave us a long list of species that, he claimed, held the secret for curing various ills of body and spirit. Many students took an interest in plants that could affect the brain, the most complex and mysterious part of our bodies. This special group of plants, the professor explained, was known and used in great secrecy by indigenous people, particularly in the Amazon, who at that time were almost unknown to us.

Study materials for these classes included plant samples collected by researchers and their technical articles. The majority of ethnobotanical publications were written by biologists and botanists. However, we also read one report by William T. Vickers, an anthropologist, and Timothy Plowman (1983) a botanist, about plants the Secoya found useful. Their interdisciplinary approach involved highly structured and detailed information on how the Secoya used plant species; it also provided a compelling model for research on plants and indigenous groups.

In 1994, while Vickers ("Guillermo," as the Secoya called him) was visiting San Pablo de Cantesiayá, one of us went there to meet him. In this conversation and later ones, we learned that William had decided to study anthropology because he wanted to understand how Amazonian groups adapt to their difficult environments, an interest piqued by his reading of various researchers and hypotheses. He chose San Pablo after hearing that two Summer Institute of Linguistics missionaries, Orville and Mary Johnson, had convinced Secoya people to leave the Cuyabeno lakes area and settle in their present community along the Aguarico River. He wanted to study how they would adapt to their new territory.

During his anthropological research, Vickers found that many cultural practices were directly related to the use of plants. In *Los Sionas y Secoyas: Su adaptación al ambiente amazónico* (1989), he analyzed the importance of using and managing botanical resources, which sparked his interest in identifying them. He sent samples to Dr. H. V. Pinkley, who had studied Cofán ethnobotany. In turn, Pinkley forwarded them to Timothy Plowman, a famous ethnobotanist at the Field Museum in Chicago. After identifying the samples at the Field Museum, Vickers and Plowman published a pioneering study of ethnobotany in the Ecuadorian Amazon entitled *Useful Plants of the Siona and Secoya Indians of Eastern Ecuador* (1983). As an aside, Vickers later told us in1994 that he never spent any time in the field with Pinkley or Plowman.

Although Vickers followed traditional collection methods (random identification without transects or quadrants), his research showed that the Secoya used a broadly diverse group of plant species (224), more than other ethnic group in the Ecuadorian Amazon (Cerón 2002). His anthropological and ethnobotanical work encouraged younger researchers to take up ethnobotany. In the early 1990s, for example, Paz y Miño et al. (1995) completed a study of useful vines among the Siona-Secoya. From 2003 to 2010, other specialists examined biodiversity in Secoya territory. Adopting a more participatory approach, they expanded the inventory of flora and fauna known by the Secoya, providing essential data for preserving the natural environment and Secoya culture (Yépez et al. 2005, de la Torre and Yépez,

2007). From 2003 to 2008, another study combined various research methods (transects, a permanent plot, an ethnobotanical trail, and random collection) along with direct Secoya participation to identify 1,005 useful plant species, all with their indigenous names. This is the largest number of plants used by any indigenous group in Ecuador (Cerón et al. 2011).

Vickers worked with us on various articles that culminated in two books: *Al inicio del sendero: Estudios etnobotánicos Secoya* (Yépez et al. 2005) and *Caminando en el sendero: Hacia la conservación del ambiente y la cultura Secoya* (de la Torre et al. 2007). His articles drew on his broad knowledge of Secoya culture in all of its forms, while his ethnobotanical analysis emphasized the importance of environmental conservation and cultural survival. His review of the history of tourism provided an essential starting point in understanding Secoya cultural dynamics and environment, offering new ideas on how to plan and implement sustainable projects

Bill Vickers in a Secoya garden (Photo: Edite Vickers)

Ethnobotany as an Educational and Conservation Tool in Secoya Territory

Indigenous management and stewardship of natural areas appears to be more efficient than the official system of protected areas; indigenous people become natural guardians at no cost to the government. Subsistence activities based on gardening, hunting, and fishing take place within a territory that they themselves have defined. Such activities seem to have occurred without significantly altering the environment despite producing what could be called a domesticated landscape. It is worth noting that traditional practices have today been displaced by aggressive forms of production that aggravate and accelerate environmental and cultural destruction.

From this perspective, and faced with a worldwide environmental crisis, ethnobotanical research should become a priority—especially in Amazonian cultures where younger Indians are no longer interested in learning and following traditional models of natural resource management. Ethnobotanical research can record and preserve traditional knowledge that might later be shared by the entire community. Local schools could teach environmental education to spread such knowledge, emphasizing its importance in conserving their culture and developing new models for community ventures that use traditional resources.

Vickers' work in recording Secoya plant knowledge more than forty years ago laid the groundwork for other researchers, who confirmed that Secoya culture is one of the most ro-

bust and sophisticated in the Amazon. His work represents an invaluable legacy for new generations of Secoya, who, thanks to William T. Vickers, still have access to traditional knowledge. For us, his research represented an inspiration, and his support was essential in our efforts to preserve Secoya culture and their natural environment. It was an honor to have shared significant parts of this journey with him.

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