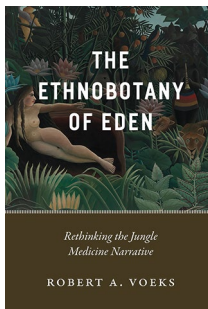


Deconstructing Eden



The Ethnobotany of Eden: Rethinking the Jungle Medicine Narrative

By Robert A. Voeks

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Eden, El Dorado and the Fountain of Youth have all been sources of inspiration for failed expeditions seeking riches and eternal health, and have remained enduringly alluring to human curiosity over time. I think that many of us have dreamt of Eden at some point in our lives — that mystical, untouched place of health, wealth and bounty where a lush tapestry of life can be found. In *The Ethnobotany of Eden*, Voeks provides plentiful scientific evidence to counter this concept, for in reality, there are no virgin forests untouched by humankind merely awaiting discovery by outsiders. He draws heavily from the discipline of ethnobotany (the scientific study of how people relate to plants) in the text, and enriches his writing with fascinating case studies and specific examples of human–plant interactions from tropical forests across the globe. As a discipline, ethnobotany is embodied by the detailed documentation of the myriad uses of plants — ranging from food to medicine, construction and tools — and is thus a perfect tool for this literary endeavour.

For as long as humans have walked the Earth, they have been a part of nature and have acted as habitat engineers, constantly modifying the environment to meet the resource demands of the population, from shelter to food and medicine. There have not been virgin forests for millennia, and even today we can find remnants of ecosystem manipulation going back centuries or more.

Yet, visions of an untouched Eden have persisted in modern times through

film, novels and even in the pitches of conservationist groups in the form of the jungle medicine narrative. “The most resilient myth, however, seems to be the existence of virgin nature. [...] Its persistence is rivalled only by the myth of the noble savage,” Voeks writes. Such myths are the result of a complex tale spun over centuries of colonial exploration and exploitation of indigenous people, born from dreams of paradise, health and endless bounty. In this Eden dwells the “noble savage”, the guardian of a forest rich in an endless supply of delicious fruits and medicinal leaves. This storyline of the noble savage is often pitted against a protagonist who must in some way gain access to the medicinal secrets of the indigenous gate keeper, even if by trickery or aggression.

In *The Ethnobotany of Eden*, Voeks systematically deconstructs the concept of Eden from its origins and documents its metamorphosis into the jungle medicine narrative that persists today. Whereas early concepts of Eden served explorers and hunters of rare healing plants as justification for their deeds (and misdeeds), the more recent jungle medicine narrative has been used by well-intentioned conservationists in efforts to raise awareness concerning habitat and biodiversity loss in the world’s tropical forests. A key tenet in this narrative has been based on the premise that the next big, blockbuster drug and untold riches await amongst the understudied flora of tropical forests. An unintentional consequence of the jungle medicine narrative is that it has also perpetuated biopiracy legends and mistrust. Biopiracy has been a longstanding reality for the tropics, and the author takes a deep dive into numerous historical examples concerning highly valued spice plants (for example, nutmeg) and medicinal plants (for example, cinchona bark and Madagascar periwinkle).

Voeks’ exploration of this topic is both insightful and beautifully written. By interweaving narratives from accounts of Eden and historic searches for medicine and riches in the Earth’s tropical forests, and counterbalancing with modern ethnobotanical research and reports,

he achieves a unique and scientifically discerning perspective in his writing. Readers will delight in learning about the history of many plants that we take for granted today. It may come as some surprise that the ingredients we commonly find in our home spice cabinets were once the subject of intense and costly trade, and even led to the slaughter and enslavement of thousands across the tropics. I appreciate that the author does not hide this ugly, brutal side of the historical plant trade, but addresses it head-on in his analysis. A better understanding of history is key to ensuring a more just future for all.

Chapter by chapter, Voeks builds layer upon layer of knowledge steeped in historical contexts and current day research, allowing the reader to imagine how the experiences of these early explorers could have fostered the construction of a vision of Eden. In later chapters, he describes the role of weeds in food and medicine as well as the critical role of women in the provision of household healthcare over the ages. Drawing on examples of the African diaspora in South America, he not only elaborates on the movement of plants with people, but also illustrates the capacities of human resilience and adaptation amongst immigrants learning to survive in foreign environments where the plant life differs from that of their homeland.

Voeks is to be commended on a superbly researched and well-woven tale of Eden, deconstructed through careful integration of perspectives from botanical history and modern ethnobotanical theory. Readers will come away from this book with a better appreciation for the complex ways in which we view nature and our place in it, as well as a better understanding of the history behind the discovery, trade and even theft of some of humankind’s most influential botanical medicines. □

Reviewed by Cassandra L. Quave

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