

# Cultural Ecology Newsletter

(CEN #28 -- Fall '96)

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## **Phil Porter Receives First Netting Award**

Philip Wayland Porter was the recipient of the 1996 Robert McC. Netting Award. 1996 was the inaugural year for this award, to be given annually by the CESG in recognition of distinguished research and professional activities that bridge geography and anthropology. Phil Porter is Professor of Geography at the University of Minnesota, where he has taught for 40 years, interrupted by numerous seasons of field research in Africa, two years of teaching at the University of Dar es Salaam, and four years as Director of the Office of International Programs at Minnesota. Porter's long career of research and teaching collaboration with Anthropologists began with his participation in the Culture and Ecology in East Africa Project. That pioneering research involved 13 months of field work with five anthropologists in Kenya, Tanganyika, and Uganda in 1961-62. Porter claims that he has always been more interested in getting research right than getting it published. Nevertheless, Porter is well known for his many publications, including numerous articles in the Annals, PG, and American Anthropologist. In short, Phil Porter's career has been marked by research and professional contributions valued by geographers and anthropologists alike.

*- Nicholas Dunning.*

## **Conference Report: Plants for Food and Medicine**

**Botany: What's In it for Drylands Development? Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London UK, 5 Jul 1996.**

This meeting formed the last day of a five day international conference on Plants for Food and Medicine organised by Kew. In an earlier session, ethnobotanical research on the low susceptibility of the Maasai to heart disease, traced to their ingestion plant products capable of breaking down fats, had reached the national press. Scientists, aid donors and NGOs were well represented in the audience, including a small contingent from developing countries. The speakers touched on many themes of potential interest to cultural ecologists including the use of wild foods during famine

and complex emergencies, participatory methods to assess local knowledge of plants, and the role of ethnobotany in drylands development.

Chaired by Kew's enigmatic Director, Sir Ghilleen Prance, the meeting commenced with a dry (sic) presentation about the role of the British Commonwealth in drylands development, after which Roger Smith introduced Kew's Botanical ark, the Millennium Seed Bank, and showed how it is helping to satisfy the terms of the International Convention on Biological Diversity. John Hall (Bangor), with 17 years work in Africa behind him, was well placed to chart the changes which have occurred in forestry training and practice in Africa's drylands. Next, Joao Araujo Filho (EMBRAPA, the Brazilian national research organisation), looked at the problems facing farmers in the semi-arid lands of North-east Brazil. In this region farmers combine fuelwood sales with crop and livestock production, but without much integration of these three activities and often with heavy environmental damage. EMBRAPA's research is with alley cropping, which can accommodate the three elements. A good example of integrated research into agro-ecosystems, although still at an early stage of development.

Irene Guijt (Int. Inst. for Env't. & Dev't.) gave a lively presentation of IIED's 'Hidden Harvest' project, which is exploring alternative ways for policy makers to collect information on forest products and wild foods, using participatory rural appraisal techniques such as resource mapping and matrix scoring. PRA is a "methodological nightmare" for economists and ecologists, but a "weapon" for local people since it better reflects their perceptions and values. Findings are still provisional, but this methodological debate provoked animated discussion about the range of incentives that could be used to encourage the protection of 'hidden' dryland resources (which are not, of course, 'hidden' at all to local users). Three papers by botanists followed. Robert Whitcombe (W.S. Atkins consultants) talked on the uses of botany in targeting aid to small enterprises like beekeeping, which requires plants that produce pollen, in Oman and Ethiopia. Phil Harris (Coventry) looked at the on the multiple uses of *Prosopis* species (an invasive weed to some, a tool for reforestation of degraded land to others), and Steven Davis (Kew) explained the Survey of Economic Plants for Arid and Semi-Arid Lands project, SEPASAL. SEPASAL is a large database which tries to merge indigenous and scientific knowledge on thousands of 'useful' plant species. This raising interesting debates about the control of local knowledge and access to it, which were insufficiently addressed by the speaker.

Koos Neefjes, a policy advisor at OXFAM, rounded off the day by examining how the demands placed on relief agencies by natural hazards and war in Africa require them to respond quickly to complex emergencies, and to shelter and feed large numbers of people. Agencies often overlook the environmental impact of relief camps, including depletion of nearby botanical resources and wild foods. He also proposed a renewed

focus on improving long term food self sufficiency in agro-pastoral systems, which are increasingly common in semi-arid environments. Are these systems reducing ecological diversity, through grazing pressure and cropping? People's short term coping mechanisms during famines also have major implications for plants, trees, and seed stocks, upon which people become reliant once other food supplies are exhausted. These are areas where ecologists and botanists could contribute, particularly if they are able to make rapid assessments.

The meeting raised several issues for future debate, but did not really answer them. Perhaps they will emerge in the conference book, due in 1997. Is biodiversity an unhelpful western concept, rather like desertification', and best protected by local people, not us? Is the scientific study of dryland plants extractive', and is ethnobotanical research any more relevant to local needs? Could the methods it uses be extended to include participatory research with dryland peoples? How are plants valued, and what are the real impacts of human uses of drylands over long time periods? Any why, except for the biogeographers and cultural ecologists (so sparsely represented in British geography), does our discipline, facing chronic underfunding for developing areas research, have so little to do with the types of researchers present at this meeting? As the rain started to pound on the roof of the Joddrell lecture theatre, I realised I knew the feeling well. We need another conference.....

- *Simon Batterbury, LSE*

### **News From Members**

**Nicholas Dunning** (University of Cincinnati) reports that he, along with university colleague anthropologist Vernon Scarborough, have received a National Science Foundation grant of \$241,000 for proposed research entitled "An Accretive Model of Land and Water Use for the Ancient Maya of Northwestern Belize." Fieldwork will be undertaken in the Programme for Belize in 1997 and 1998.

**Simon Batterbury** (LSE) with Prof Andrew Warren (University College London) have received a grant for their project "Land Use and Land Degradation In Southwestern Niger: Change And Continuity." The project is being funded by the Global Environmental Change Initiative of the Economic & Social Research Council, UK (phase 1: \$45,220, phase 2: \$118,000). This project is examining environmental and social history in Zarma communities, at a time of great uncertainty and recurrent hardship in dryland West Africa. Adaptations in the agro-pastoral system, and soil erosion trends, are being traced over a 40 year period by an interdisciplinary team. A later report is available via the [project web site](#).

### **Book Reviews**

*Eagle Down is our Law: Witsuwit'en Law, Feasts, and Land Claims.* By Antonia Mills. xxi and 208 pp., illus., notes, bibliog., index. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1994.

*Review by Douglas Deur, Louisiana State University*

Antonia Mills' recent book contains her expert testimony, commissioned by the Witsuwit'en and Gitskan Indians of west-central British Columbia, and presented in the Canadian land claims case, *Delgamuukw v. the Queen*. In this trial, Mills served on a team of expert witnesses which also included Hugh Brody, whose *Maps and Dreams* has become a minor classic on the legitimization of indigenous economic systems. Much like Brody, Mills seeks to document and legitimize the legal and land tenure systems of the Witsuwit'en, a people geographically and culturally intermediate between the peoples of the Northwest coast and the Athapaskan interior of British Columbia and Alaska. (Formerly studied by Julian Steward, the Witsuwit'en are commonly known as the Bulkey River Carrier).

*Delgamuukw v. the Queen* was a highly visible case in Canada, renowned for the markedly ethnocentric tone of the court's findings, in which the judge extinguished all aboriginal title to the contested lands. True to the spirit of British colonialism, he portrayed these native cultures as incapable of legitimate systems of land tenure, being of a "a much lower, even primitive order," (quoted in Mills, p. 16) because of their lack of written history, wheeled vehicles, or horses before European contact.

Mills' testimony describes a largely pre-European "legal" tradition which continues to order Witsuwit'en life in the present. She adeptly describes components of this system, including ceremonial feasting, the exchanges of ceremonial titles, and the presentation of eagle down at the closing of disputes. Importantly, Mills documents the transfer of chiefly titles which grant the bearers control over resources within defined territories. Using ethnographical and archival evidence, she displays connections between this legal complex and Witsuwit'en oral traditions, ceremonial practices, and religious expression, and examines European impacts upon Witsuwit'en culture. The book also includes forwards by two Witsuwit'en leaders, prefaces by two ethnographers, and a prologue and epilogue by Mills which discuss the trial.

Overall, Mills' work provides a solid ethnographic treatment of Witsuwit'en legal traditions. Still, Mills' work is not entirely convincing; without references to the other expert testimonies, her contribution seems necessary, but not, in itself, sufficient. Like much ethnographic research, the connections between culture and landscape are expressed ambiguously and peripherally. One might ask: how are the described traditions expressed geographically? How do they corporeally bind particular people to components of the landscape? How does the land tenure system reflect (or even

shape) a changing seasonal round? Rather than merely emphasizing the internal workings of a culture, one must arguably exhibit how these internal workings shape and reflect attachments between a people and their lands.

Certainly, this chronic omission within ethnographic writing creates a vacuum which geographers are well-positioned to fill, within future land claims cases. Though incomplete, Mills' book will be valuable in this pursuit. Her experiences in the courts are enlightening. And, when assessing native land claims, geographers will be called upon to explore the sometimes complex and ritualized systems surrounding traditional land tenure; Mills' book provides a tentative blueprint for this portion of our task.

***Tariacuri's Legacy: The Prehispanic Tarascan State***, by Helen Perlstein Pollard. xx and 266 pp., figures, maps, tables, appendices, and index. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

*Reviewed by Dean Sinclair, Louisiana State University*

Much of the research on prehispanic civilizations in Middle America has focused on the Aztec of Central Mexico and the Maya of southern Mexico and Guatemala. Until recently, other ethnic groups and states have received relatively short shrift. One of these states, the Tarascan, is the subject of Pollard's fascinating and well-written work, part of the Civilization of the American Indian Series. A resurgence of interest in the Tarascan state has at least in part been driven by the Purepecha, modern ethnic Tarascans seeking to understand their heritage as well as to come to terms with their place in the Mexican state. Pollard's study provides considerable insight into the origins and workings of the Tarascan empire, drawing on archaeological, geographic, ethnographic, and other research to place the Tarascans into the rich cultural mix of Middle America.

The Tarascan people are thought to have emerged from the stream of migrants from the north who settled on the shores of Lake Patzcuaro in the late Post Classic period, between 1200 and 1300 A.D. Led by their culture-hero Tariacuri, who lived in the early 1300s, the Tarascans began unifying the independent peoples of the Lake Patzcuaro basin, a project carried forward by his sons after his death. A tributary state encompassing 75,000 sq km between the Lerma River in the north and the Balsas Basin in the south resulted, centered on the core region of the Lake Patzcuaro basin. From this arose what Pollard terms a multiethnic state, which was engaged in both ethnic assimilation and ethnic segregation as part of its expansionist policies. As Pollard writes: "The expansion of the Tarascan state out of the Lake Patzcuaro Basin and beyond Central Michoacan involved the incorporation of varied populations, the control of large territories, and the defense of multiple hostile borders, including the long eastern frontier, along which Tarascan forces faced

the westward movement of the Aztec Empire" (p. 87). The Tarascan empire effectively maintained its borders, foiling the ongoing attempts by the Aztecs to surround their powerful western rival. All of these efforts, however, became moot in 1521 with the conquest of the Aztecs by the Spanish, and in 1522 the Tarascan empire, in the throes of a change of leadership, was ceded to the Spanish without a fight.

Pollard has studied the Tarascan state for twenty years, and this work represents a synthesis of her research as well as that of many other scholars. She effectively draws together the physical environment in which the Tarascan state arose in the 1300s and the political and economic forces which contributed to the empire's success. The book leans heavily on two key sources. The first is archaeological work-- particularly in and around Tzintzuntzan, the Tarascan capital--and the second is the *Relacion de Michoacan*, a Spanish document from 1540-1541 which focuses on the Tarascan religion, politics, official history, and Tarascan society. The eight chapters of Pollard's work detail the urban realm of the Tarascan state, the rise of the empire, the economic integration of the empire's frontier region with its core region, the administrative structure of the state, and the diverse elements of state religion. Pollard concludes with a chapter which situates the Tarascan empire into Mesoamerican prehistory, describing its contentious relationship with the neighboring Aztec.

*Tariacuri's Legacy* is strongest in its presentation of the broader picture of the structure of life in the Tarascan state, particularly the complex role of ethnicity in the prehispanic state. Playing a surprisingly small part in the discussion, however, is the role of mining and metallurgy in the Tarascan empire. There is no discussion of labor associated with mining and little discussion of metallurgical techniques or products except in the context of ceremonial objects in the state religion. This omission aside, the book's many maps, photographs, and reproductions of drawings from the *Relacion* do much to convey the story of the Tarascan state.

This book should be of considerable value to those interested in prehispanic Mexican civilizations. It also serves as a model for an understanding of the origins, development, administration, and functioning of the state in the Americans prior to the arrival of the Spanish. Pollard's synthesis of the Tarascan empire does much to fill a gap in the literature on the complex cultural dynamic of pre-conquest Mexico, situating the Tarascan Empire in its rightful place, with the better known Aztec Empire which lay just beyond its borders.

This page maintained by the Editor. Last revised 8.16.04.