INTRODUCTION

A recent area of interest in North American anthropology is the identification, use, and protection of traditional ecological knowledge, much of which focuses on the use of plants by the Native peoples.

There is a rich scholarship on the use of plants among Native peoples but much of it has been contained in unpublished reports, historical records, ethnographies, and articles in scholarly journals. Recently, anthropologist Daniel Moerman authored two comprehensive books synthesizing the use of plants by Native Americans for food and medicines (Moerman 2010, 2009), bringing together this rich scholarship.

The results are staggering. According to Moerman there are more than 10,000 food uses of more than 1500 species of plants, and more than 20,000 medicinal uses of more than 2500 species of plants by more than 200 different Native American groups.

Native American Food Plants

Those familiar with traditional lifeways of Native Americans are not likely to be surprised to learn that many groups incorporated at least several dozen different kinds of plants into their diet and that in some parts of the continent, people began domesticating plants, especially corn, beans, and squash, thousands of years ago. Most food plants incorporated into traditional diets, however, were wild and include an enormous diversity of root crops, berries, nuts, fruits, grasses, seeds, cacti, seaweed, and more.

Which plants were utilized, and how much people depended upon them, varied...
according to region. Corn, for example, has been important in the diets of many Native groups in areas of the American southwest and eastern portions of the United States and Canada for more than a thousand years; and acorns have been a staple among California groups for a very long time.

Not all groups necessarily utilized plants for food in the same way. Moerman (2010) reports that there are more than 100 different food uses for each of common chokecherry, banana yucca, corn, and Saskatoon serviceberry among Native Americans. Major uses include eating fresh, to make wine, tea, or juice, and as ingredients in soups, in breads, cakes, and puddings, and sauces. Other uses of food plants include appetizers, candy, desserts, dietary aids, and porridges. The Algonquin, for example, used chokecherries for making wine, eating fresh, and for preserves. The Apache ate the berries fresh; and the Blackfoot used them to make juice, pemmican, and soup.

Native American Medicinal Plants
As with food plants, medicinal usage of plants has not been consistent among Native groups. Moerman documents more than 100 uses for each of common yarrow, calamus, big sagebrush cherry, fernleaf biscuitroot, common chokecherry, Louisiana sagewort, devil’s club, common juniper, Canadian mint, and stinging nettle. Dozens of categories of use include analgesics (pain relief), anesthetics (reducing sense of touch or pain), antidiarrheals, antidotes (negating poison), burn dressings, cold remedies, cough medicines, ear medicines, eye medicines, hallucinogens (induces hallucinations), laxatives, narcotics, panaceas (cure-all), poultries (held against the skin), sedatives, and stimulants.

Variability of use is demonstrated with common yarrow. Depending on the Native group, its use has been documented as a cold remedy, analgesic, burn dressing, panacea, antidiarrheal, haemorrhoid aid, cough medicine, stimulant, gastrointestinal aid, blood purifier, eye medicine, snakebite remedy, and more.

Two of the most well-known medicinal plants among Native Americans are peyote and tobacco. According to Moerman (2009), reports on peyote (Lophophora williamsii) use exist for several different groups and attest to several different uses. It is probably known mostly for its use as a hallucinogen, but other documented uses include analgesic, tuberculosis remedy, dermatological aid, gastrointestinal aid, narcotic, cold remedy, and panacea.

Like peyote, tobacco is probably known primarily as a ritual or ceremonial plant, but there are many other documented uses. These include use as an analgesic, narcotic, cough medicine, cold remedy, dermatological aid, snakebite remedy, urinary aid, toothache remedy, ear medicine, hallucinogen, sedative, and stimulant.

As noted by Moerman (2009) there are many paradoxes regarding the use of plants as medicines by Native American groups. A plant used by one group as a stimulant, for example, may be used by another group as a sedative. There are multiple explanations for this, including the problem of imposing non-Native logic on Native practices, a failure of non-Native people to appreciate the homeopathic nature of Native healing,
different belief systems (e.g., placebo effects), and the fact that different groups may have been using different parts of plant and preparing them differently.

It is also interesting that in many cases, Native groups used the same plants for both food and healing. Usually, different parts of the plants were used. Moerman (2010) notes that when this is the case, usually the fruits and seeds are used for food and the roots are used for medicine.

Contextualizing Interest in Plant Use
Interest in plant use by anthropologists, Native Americans, and others in recent years has heightened for multiple reasons. One way of contextualizing this heightened interest is that it fits within expressions and assertions of native rights; the revitalization of native cultures; the emerging appreciation of the value of traditional ecological knowledge and intellectual property rights; the recognition that resources (e.g., the plants themselves) are being lost due to development and environmental change; and the recognition that traditional ecological knowledge (including the use of plants) is being lost. As well, for some, there is the potential of using traditional plant knowledge in economic sustainability programs.

For Further Interest
Much of the work published in Moerman’s recent books on food plants and medicinal plants are extracted from his earlier publication Native American Ethnobotany, published by Timber Press in 1998. Besides food and medicine, in that book he documents Native American plant use for construction, fibers, dyes, and more. A web site supported by the University of Michigan make the information in that book available on-line. The database documents the use of more than 4,000 species of plants by 291 different Native groups. The web site is http://herb.umd.umich.edu

References Cited