
ETHNOPHARMACOLOGIC SEARCH
for PSYCHOACTIVE DRUGS • 2017

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FOREWORD

The contents of this book and the ESPD50 symposium from which these papers are derived shows that the investigation of psychoactive drugs is now a serious scientific endeavour. It is no longer the playground of a few adventurers. The indigenous peoples of the world have been fantastic explorers of the properties of the plants and fungi around them. They have discovered and used many psychoactive compounds, and often these plants are central to their cultural and religious life. But these discoveries have also been significant in a broader context, in that they have provided leads to the development of significant therapeutic medicines. The preservation of this knowledge under the stewardship of indigenous cultures has been an invaluable contribution to the advancement of science and medicine. This book clearly shows that this is a worldwide phenomenon, as it reports discoveries from the Amazon to Australia and from Mexico to South Africa. It also shows the broad range of organisms that contain psychoactive compounds, from Mexican fungi to tall Amazonian trees or desert Acacias of Australia. Many of us involved with this volume owe much to the encouragement or tutelage of Richard Evans Schultes, who was the pioneer who could justifiably be recognized as the founder of the interdisciplinary field of psycho-ethnopharmacology. Schultes' role as an explorer, an ethnobotanist extraordinaire, and a scientist who encouraged his colleagues to investigate the biodynamic compounds in the plants he discovered, opened a new frontier in the study of naturally-occurring psychoactive compounds. Without his encouragement to publish a paper about a visit to the Yanomami where I reported on their hallucinogenic snuff, I might never have followed this up in many other places and with several other tribes.

The rich ethnomedical heritage of indigenous peoples is now being scientifically studied and applied in many different ways, as is apparent from chapters of this volume. As someone who has spent much time with the tribal peoples of the Amazon and studied many different psychoactive compounds, it is my hope that those of us involved in research do all we can to maintain the cultures and the knowledge of these indigenous pioneers. Their discoveries would never have come to the attention of science had it not been for their role as guardians of this knowledge. In return for these inestimable gifts, it is our responsibility to be active in the preservation of the habitats in which tribal people live. But our responsibilities as members of the scientific community do not end there. We must also become strong advocates for the recognition and protection of the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples. The sort of research reported here is leading to a much wider application of these indigenous discoveries, potentially yielding novel medicines worth billions of dollars to the global pharmaceutical industry. We must make sure that our indigenous friends also benefit for their role in making these discoveries and preserving this knowledge as part of their intellectual and cultural heritage. We must make sure that indigenous peoples and their knowledge are recognized and preserved. At the same time, we must encourage them to develop at their own pace and make their own choices when it comes to the decision to share (or not) their ethnomedical treasures.

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