

FOREWORD

Gary Paul Nabhan

Bush Medicine of the Bahamas is a bittersweet reminder of the value of place-based traditional ecological and medicinal knowledge. Such knowledge, we have belatedly realized, was once widely distributed among the entire human family, but has been rapidly disappearing. Whenever we fail to attend to traditional stores of knowledge that connect the health of our homelands to the health of our bodies, such connections will most certainly atrophy. But the bush medicine knowledge of the residents of San Salvador Island—and the careful attending to it by Jeff McCormack, Kathleen Maier and Patty Wallens—has miraculously allowed Bahamian knowledge of bush medicines to squeeze through a bottleneck in human history that has kept other traditional stores of knowledge from surviving. It is all the more remarkable that such knowledge has now been set forth in such a beautiful, innovative and comprehensive book and website, now accessible to virtually everyone on this planet.

It is far too infrequently that we can speak of tradition and innovation in the very same breath, or write them, as I am doing, in the very same sentence. And yet, what I find particularly attractive about this project is the dynamic and altogether refreshing way in which it presents traditional knowledge about bush medicines. From the very start, this book dispels some well-entrenched truisms—for instance, that only indigenous peoples with

thousands of years in one place retain valuable knowledge, ethics and practices about plants; or that we have already learned all there is to learn about the utilitarian and spiritual values of the plants commonly shared among the many islands in the Caribbean and western Atlantic. The current inhabitants of San Salvador Island are not of the original Lucayan or Arawak culture of the Bahamas; they are diaspora peoples of African descent who, in just a couple of centuries, learned the value of their local flora out of necessity and intellectual curiosity. They themselves have improvised new remedies from plants which have been in the *materia medica* of humankind for millennia. They have also resourcefully borrowed from the African and Caribbean ethnopharmacologies of their ancestors and neighbors to diversify their medicine cabinet. The residents of San Salvador Island and their ancestors have been not merely keepers of static traditions, but innovators in the deepest sense.

At the same time, there is much to admire about the way in which Jeff McCormack has wedded tradition and innovation through the work of his multi-talented team. Although the authors greatly respect and draw upon the classic ethnobotanies of the last one hundred and fifty years, they have integrated digital photography, videography, and Web-based education and dissemination into this project like no ethnobotany before them. They have

not pretended that their interviewees are infallible, or isolated from other cultural influences. In fact, the comparative methodology of this book shines through on nearly every page, and is, in and of itself, a well-crafted innovation.

Moreover, I detect something else in this book, written within and between nearly every line: a reverence for life, and an appreciation for cultural and natural diversity in all their many forms. There is a congenial and respectful tonality in this masterwork that I fail to pick up in other ethnographies and ecological oral histories of our era. Too many field workers are now dazzled and distracted by the technologies at hand, rather than using them for a higher purpose. This book has a tone quite different from the more extractive drug plant exploration

times that have been produced in ivory towers over the last two decades. In short, this book feels as though it has emerged from the field, and not from a lofty tower. The interviews have more than mere data in them: they have story. And what beautiful stories they are, some of them with healing power in their own right. *Bush Medicine of the Bahamas* is a delight to read and is filled with photos that are a wonder to look at. Most of all, this book is inhabited by voices quite unlike those which we typically hear in mainstream media. They speak eloquently to a world which too few of us know or fully understand, a world which deserves our utmost respect.

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