Ethnobryology

Harris, E.S.J. (2008). Ethnobryology: traditional uses and folk classification of bryophytes. *Bryologist* 111, 169–217.

Although ethnobotany is a well-established part of anthropology, the related study of ethnobryology is virtually unknown. In this paper, Eric Harris goes some way to redress this by producing a review and summary of traditional uses and folk classifications of bryophytes around the world. His review has two main parts; (1) peoples' use and knowledge of bryophytes, and (2) a list of uses of bryophytes culled from the ethno-bryological literature (although he does not cover horticultural uses or use as fuel).

He begins by examining folk classifications. Given their small size and general lack of distinctiveness to humans, bryophytes tend to have been put into 'rag-bag' classifications together with other small plants such as algae, lichens and even small angiosperms, such as Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*), all of which have been called 'moss'. Harris gives a number of examples in various languages in which disparate plants have been called the equivalent of 'moss' or 'liverwort', showing that many cultures have only one or two words to cover the mass of 'small green things'. That said, many cultures also split these categories according to where the plants grow. Thus they may be divided into 'tree moss', 'rock moss', etc. This can be important as some of these plants are considered to have medicinal properties derived from where they grow; e.g. European herbals report the medicinal properties of 'tree moss' which '*doth partake of the nature of the tree from whence it is taken*'. These medicinal folk taxonomies can mean that plants with similar growth form and ecology are thought to be related; here Harris gives the example of *Marchantia polymorpha* which is seen in traditional Chinese medicine as related to the duckweeds *Elodea* and the fern *Azolla*. In contrast to this, he shows that some medicinally important plants may be seen as distinct, e.g. *Rhodobryum* spp. in traditional Chinese medicine and *Plagiomnium insigne* by some Native American peoples.

Harris then turns to the uses of bryophytes. By far the greatest number of uses is medicinal, but they can also be used for their absorbent properties, as packing material, as components of clothing, as bedding or as decoration. They do not seem to have formed a significant portion of human diet anywhere. China and the native peoples of North America make the most use of bryophytes, with rather less use being made elsewhere, even in traditional medicine. Harris also gives a table of 17 genera which are used in more than two countries; by far the greatest use is made of *Sphagnum*, *Marchantia* and *Polytrichum*.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of the paper is Appendix 1 in which Harris provides an ethnobryological list of the uses of bryophytes. Some are not so surprising, such as the many uses of the absorbent and antibacterial properties of *Sphagnum*, the use of *Bazzania trilobata* by some Native Americans in dyeing, or the use of *Chiloscyphus* and *Lophocolea* in perfumery by the Maori of New Zealand. On the other hand, some uses can seem distinctly bizarre, like the eating of *Conocephalum conicum* to '*stop recurring dreams of having sex with the deceased*'!

In the medical area there are some interesting insights into the interpretation of the 'doctrine of signatures'. In Europe, the liverwort *Marchantia polymorpha* was seen to resemble the liver and has thus been used to treat this organ, whereas in parts of Asia the plant was seen to resemble blistered skin and has thus been used externally to treat skin complaints. Although *Rhodobryum giganteum* is still used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat minor heart complaints, Harris lists many other mosses and liverworts which have traditional uses. *Cratoneuron filicinum* for calming and heart problems, *Fissidens* spp. as a diuretic, for digestive problems and to promote the growth of hair and many uses for *Funaria hygrometrica*. Even tiny plants like *Bryum argenteum* are not left out, being used in China for detoxification and to treat nose and sinus inflammation.

In sum this paper is a mine of fascinating information on, for me, an unknown branch of bryology, and a certain source for future study.

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