

2002

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Recommended Citation

Casagrande, David G.. "Animals and Plants of the Ancient Maya: A Guide." *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* 6, no. 1 (2002): 91-92.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jea/vol6/iss1/8>

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Animals and Plants of the Ancient Maya: A Guide

Victoria Schlesinger, with illustrations by Juan C. Chab-Medina

University of Texas Press, 2001

373 pp., \$29.92 paperback, \$70.00 hardcover

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Journal of Ecological Anthropology, 2002, 6(1):91-92

Animals and Plants of the Ancient Maya is an impressive synthesis of ecological and anthropological information regarding some of the wild plants and animals of cultural significance to the ancient and contemporary Maya. Having myself conducted extensive ethnobiological research among the Maya, I find that the book is meticulously researched and accurate. Schlesinger presents a wealth of information in a format that is both easy to read and enjoyable.

Schlesinger begins the book by detailing the current political situation of the Maya in Chapter 1. This is followed by a very well-documented chapter that presents the prehistoric through historic time periods, which provides an excellent overview of the development of Mayan civilization. By drawing on the most current literature and theory regarding this period, Schlesinger's treatment of the decline of the classic southern Maya and subsequent ascendancy of the northern lowlands avoids the all-to-common pitfall of characterizing this period as one of collapse. In Chapter 3, the author uses ethnographic, ethnohistorical and archeological sources to give a sample of pan-Mayan cultural elements, spanning Pre-Classic through Late Classic time periods, such as cosmology, the calendrical system, glyphs, and the ball game.

The next section of the book consists of six chapters each dedicated to different habitats: pine-oak forest, cloud forest, tropical forest, savanna, mangrove and coral reef. After describing each habitat Schlesinger presents biological and ecological descriptions and discusses the cultural significance for several species of plants and animals found in each habitat. I found the habitat and species descriptions to be accurate and well integrated into the overall scheme of the book. Excellent illustrations and descriptions of morphology, habitat, and range are provided to help with species identification. The author relies on archeological and ethnographic literature and personal observations to comment on the cultural significance of each species, including the representation of many species in codices and prehistoric glyphs. The final chapter includes a very brief presentation of the forces that threaten the Maya and the plants and animals included in the book.

The author succeeds at striking a balance in which novices and experts alike will find value in the information and presentation. *Animals and Plants of the Ancient Maya* can serve as a good introduction to the topics covered, while at the same time providing a valuable reference.

My only reservation about the book concerns what topics Schlesinger has decided to include and those she does not include in the book. For example, Chapter 1 includes a discussion of contemporary mistreatment of Maya populations, including American involvement in the Guatemalan civil war. While I agree with everything the author says, I'm

unclear how this relates to the overall theme of the book. Although it may be helpful for travelers and researchers to know about the current political situation, and contemporary politics have profound implications for conservation, the author doesn't tie the political discussion into either of these issues. I would like to have seen a more detailed discussion of current political and ecological problems that impact the status of the animals and plants covered in the book - for example, the effects of large scale population dislocations as a result of war, or rapid population growth in Chiapas and Mexican government programs to colonize the Lacandon rain forest.

My other concern is that the author has largely omitted domesticated plants and animals. Most of the Maya's immediate habitat is, and was, in milpa agriculture, not the climax habitats presented in the book. By focusing mostly on species from less-disturbed habitats, Schlesinger runs the risk of propagating the romantic myth of indigenous people existing in harmony with pristine habitats. She briefly mentions that Maya induced environmental degradation in the discussion of late-classic site abandonment in Chapter 2 and current habitat destruction in the final chapter. But the general tone of these presentations is that external political forces are largely to blame. It is undeniable that NAFTA, foreign corporations, and non-Maya co-opting the best agricultural land all contribute to habitat destruction. But the Maya should also be portrayed as an integral part of their ecosystem who have radically altered all successional stages from milpa to mature forest and coral reef, at times in the absence of external forces.

Any attempt to describe the relationship between the Maya, their landscape, and the plants and animals that they use, in my opinion, should also include milpas and the early successional stages of fallow land. This is, after all, where the ancient Maya spent most of their time and derived most of their sustenance. It is therefore interesting that the book does not include domesticated plants like corn, beans, or squash. I would like to have seen a chapter on the milpa ecosystem similar to what the author has done with the other six ecosystems.

The omission of agricultural plants and animals is partly understandable given the author's stated intention of promoting the conservation of the species that are included. But biodiversity conservation also includes domesticates. Not only do the Maya conserve critical genetic resources for plants domesticated in Mesoamerica, like corn, beans, squash, and tomatoes, but these plants have profound cultural significance. Tourists and researchers interested in Mayan relationships with their biota cannot avoid considering agricultural practices. A presentation about the domesticated plants and animals that visitors are likely to find in Maya milpas, along with their cultural importance and conservation issues, would have been useful.

I do not mean to deny the importance of the 83 plants and animals that are included, all of which are in need of conservation, have cultural significance for the Maya, and for which information is presented clearly, accurately, and with flair. From more obvious inclusions like the jaguar, quetzal, rattlesnake, and ramón tree, to less obvious species like the locust tree and Deppe's squirrel, the author provides excellent examples of the importance of these species in Maya thought and economics. By including anecdotes, such as the possibility of counterfeit cacao seeds being used as currency by the Aztec, or illustrated representations of animals like the quetzal, monkey, jaguar and vulture in Mesoamerican art, Schlesinger keeps her presentation lively and interesting while at the same time conveying the importance of animals and plants to human societies.

I highly recommend *Animals and plants of the ancient Maya* for tourists, tourism professionals, anyone doing research in the Maya area, or anyone generally interested in how ancient people used animals and plants.