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Murphy

Native American Linguistic Ethnobotany: Historical Perspectives of Plant Descriptions, Uses, and Cultural Value

Presenter: Brennen Murphy

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Abstract: All known plants have scientific names, but only a subset of plant species have traditional common names. One of the goals of plant systematics is to assign names based on the phylogenetic or evolutionary history of all plants. In contrast the study of Native American plant names is the study of interactions between plants and people. Plants with traditional common names include ecosystem dominants as well as plants with food, fiber, medicinal, cultural, or spiritual uses. The continuous acculturation of Native Americans has led to a decrease of this historic knowledge. This study categorized the English translations of plant common names available from five western tribes to identify plant uses and perceptions among tribes. Five published accounts of 692 translations of Native American plant names to English were categorized into nine categories. These plant name categories were: 1) descriptive of itself, 2) description compared to a different plant, 3) description compared to an animal, 4) described as a food, 5) described as a medicine, 6) a plant ecology or physiological reference, 7) a cultural or folklore reference, 8) a ceremonial or spiritual reference, 9) an untranslatable monolexeme or unique name. The most frequently used plant description was a description of the plant itself, accounting for almost half (48%) of the common names. Twenty-two percent of the named plants described a useful trait to either humans or animals, including food and medicine. The Native Americans have a wealth of knowledge of the uses and utility of the plants they frequently encountered. This study is an important step to document and retain the wealth of knowledge Native Americans have to offer before it is lost.