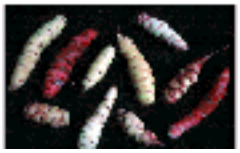
Ethnobotanical Leaflets



EBL POLICY CORNER

Restoration Ecology and Economic Botany Common Ground for Problem Solving

An Editorial By

Daniel F. Austin (Dept. of Bio. Sci., 777 Glades Rd., Boca Raton, FL 33431-0991) and Miriam Kritzer Van Zant (Dept. of Plant Bio., Carbondale, IL 62901-6509)

Management and repair of wild lands would greatly benefit from a combination of data and techniques developed in two subdisciplines in biology, economic botany and restoration ecology. These combined disciplines offer a pool of information and ideas for a practical approach to conservation. Utilized simultaneously, they provide additional opportunities for protection of biodiversity through sustainable agriculture in districts adjacent to protected sites. Additionally, the combined legacy of these disciplines has strong potential for enhancing local economies in rural areas.

Modern marketing techniques, applied with careful consideration for protection of biodiversity and long term production, can further enhance these gains for society. Traditional crafts based on sustainable harvests can provide value added cottage industries that further aid economic development. In certain areas new technologies even open the door for development of larger scale industries, as evidenced by the potential for sustainable systems with the recent development of agri-board, currently made from wheat straw (see EBL Agriboard Page).

Traditional societies abound with working examples on a smaller scale, such as utilization of medicinal plants (Austin and Bourne, 1992) and cultivation of local strains of sweet potatoes (Austin 1991, Contreras, et al. 1995). In addition, wild varieties have been commercialized for sale as ornamentals. Thousands of pounds of the seeds of a relatively inconspicious member of the morning glory family is sold yearly as a ground cover by California seed companies in both national and international markets (Austin 1998).

Although the scale is limited by sustainable yields for any type of product grown in wild or semi-wild

systems, these kinds of industries could improve economic stability and quality of lifestyle for people in all nations, including the United States. We urge policy makers, economists, and land managers at all levels to take into consideration this pool of information when looking at issues of development on both public and private lands, and in finding long-term solutions to economic problems.

About the Authors:

Daniel F. Austin is a professor at Florida Atlantic University who also heads their interdisciplinary Environmental Sciences Program. He is well known for his research on the systematics, ecology and ethnobotany of *Ipomoea*, the genus that includes sweet potatoes and morning glories. He has been a council member for the Society for Economic Botany and currently is their Book Review editor.

Miriam Kritzer Van Zant is a Ph.D student in the Department of Plant Biology at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois. Her recently completed masters thesis, "An ethnobotanical study of the plants of the Shawnee Hills of southern Illinois," explores the potential for using native and naturalized plants of documented economic value in ways to increase acreage of wild and semi-wild land. Both are members of the Society for Economic Botany and Miriam is a member of the Society for Restoration Ecology.

Literature Cited:

Austin, D.F. 1991. *Ipomoea littoralis* (Convolvulaceae): Taxonomy, Distribution and Ethnobotany. Economic Botany 45(2):251-256.

Austin, D.F. 1998. The indiscriminate vector: Human distribution of *Dichondra micrantha* (Convolvulaceae). Economic Botany 52:88-106.

Austin, D. F. and G. R. Bourne. 1992. Notes on Guyana medical ethnobotany. Economic Botany 46 (3):293-298.

Contreras, J., D.F. Austin, F. de la Puente and J. Diaz. 1995. Biodiversity of sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*, Convolvulaceae) in southern Mexico. Economic Botany 49(3):286-296.

Return to Home Page