Ethnobotany and Economic Botany: Why We Are Changing Our Journal Name

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Positionality Statement from the Authors

This editorial brings together reflections on the renaming of *Economic Botany* from a diverse group of governance members of the Society for Ethnobotany, formerly the Society for Economic Botany (SEB). The contributors represent a wide range of career stages, areas of expertise, and research interests. They include the journal's former and current Editors-in-Chief, as well as past, present, and incoming Presidents and officers of the Society, Council members, and representatives of SEB's standing and ad hoc

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committees—specifically the Student Committee, Ethics Committee, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee—serving between 2021 and 2025. This group reflects a broad cross-section of voices involved in shaping the Society's recent trajectory. Although the Society's historical and institutional roots are North American, its membership represents an interdisciplinary (Fig. 1) and international (Fig. 2) community.

Our membership includes scholars whose work bridges traditional knowledge about plant use with pressing societal challenges, ranging from food security and sovereignty (Norton et al. 2021; Sulaiman et al. 2023); biodiversity conservation (Brinckmann et al. 2025; O'Sullivan et al. 2025); healthcare practices and social justice (Maldonado Andrade et al. 2024); and climate justice (Gyeltshen et al. 2025; Menezes et al. 2023; Senkoro et al. 2024), to broader intersections of plant knowledge with sustainability, cultural traditions, revitalization (Fatur 2024; Ferrari et al. 2024; Osterhoudt et al. 2024), and spiritual practices (Dafni et al. 2023; De Meyer 2023). These approaches remind us that our discipline is not only a scientific endeavor but also a collective effort to understand, honor, and sustain the intricate relationships between peoples, plants, and fungi. Recognizing how these relationships contribute to ecological health, cultural resilience, and community well-being encourages us to engage collaboratively with knowledge holders and to foster a field that is inclusive, responsive, and attuned to the diverse and evolving realities of human–plant interactions.

Why the Journal Name Change?

Since its founding in 1947 by Edmund H. Fulling at the New York Botanical Garden, *Economic Botany* has been an academic journal dedicated to the study of useful plants. The inaugural volume of the journal featured articles such as *The role of botanical research in the chicle industry* (Egler 1947), *Tung oil—A gift of China* (Blackmon 1947), *Seaweed resources of North America and their utilization* (Tseng 1947), and *The cork oak tree in California* (Metcalf 1947). These contributions reflected the utilitarian and descriptive focus of early economic botany studies, emphasizing plant commodities, fibers, oils, and regional resource surveys. The then-Director of the New York Botanical Garden, William J. Robbins, articulated the journal's mission as follows: "*To serve as a common meeting place for botanists, interested primarily in fundamental principles, and others who are concerned with economic applications of those principles and with the industrial utilization of plants and plant products*" (Robbins 1947).

In the late 1950s, the journal became the flagship publication of the *Society for Economic Botany* (SEB), reinforcing a shared commitment to advancing scholarship at the intersection of plants, peoples, and cultures. Today, although the Society's governance remains predominantly based in North America, the SEB represents a truly global community with 577 members across 66 countries as of October 2025 (source: SEB Business Office/CiviCRM Membership Database). This geographic pattern is also reflected in the results of a 2022 SEB membership survey (Fig. 2), and shows both the Society's historical roots and its expanding international engagement. The journal similarly reflects this expanding international reach, with submissions in 2024 originating from corresponding authors across 39 countries.

The origin of the journal title *Economic Botany* was largely circumstantial. As its founder, Edmund H. Fulling, later recalled, Dr. Ralph Cheney had suggested the name during a meeting of the Torrey Botanical Club, noting that journals already existed for *Economic Entomology* and *Economic Geography*, but not for *Economic Botany*. As recounted by Llewelyn Lewis at the 1969 SEB Conference at Longwood Gardens, "*the particular name selected for the Journal appeared to be of relatively minor importance, for it might as well have been titled by some other term to indicate its concern with furthering the application of the knowledge of plants in general to human affairs*" (Williams 1969). The journal "served in great part as the impetus for the formation of the Society for Economic Botany in 1958" (Williams 1969). In 1957, the journal was turned over to the New York Botanical Garden, and in the following year, a small conference was held there to establish the Society. The purpose of the journal, and of the Society, was to bring together likeminded people interested in human–plant interactions not covered elsewhere (Robbins 1947). The term

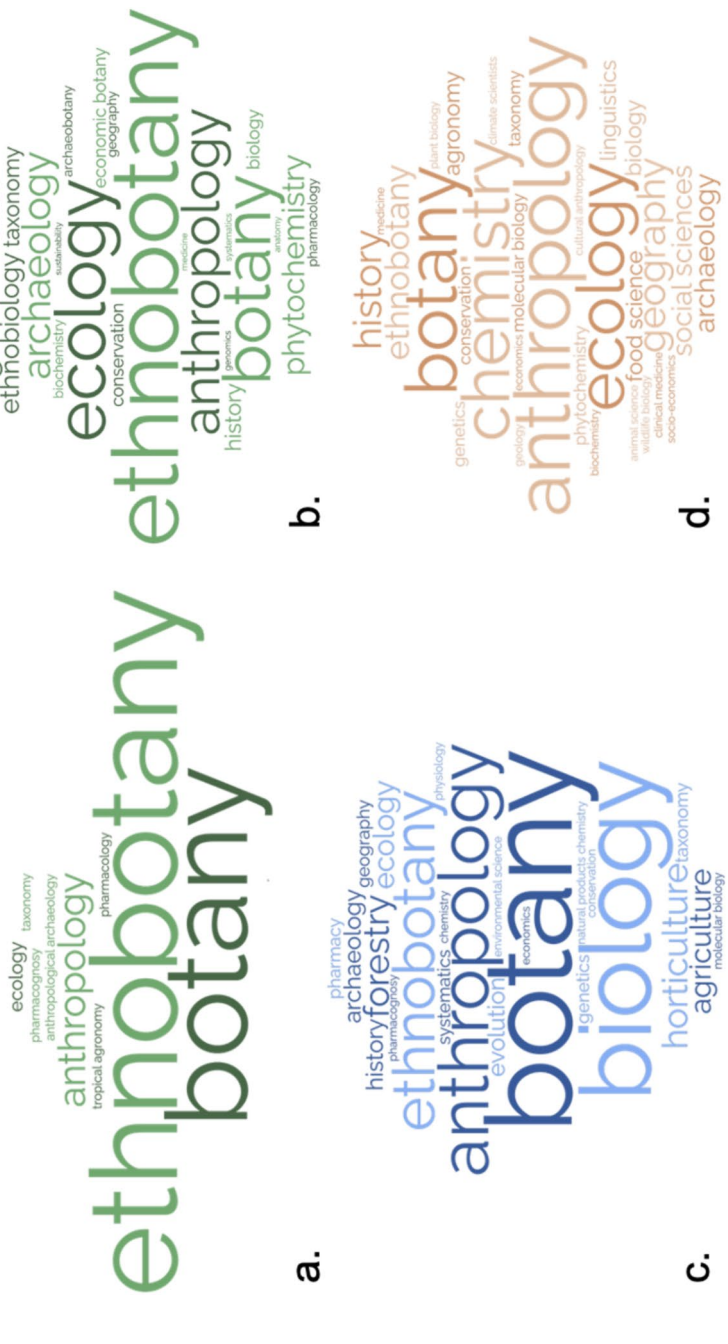

Fig. 1. Word clouds representing the most cited disciplines by SEB members in a survey of February 2022 ($N = 108$ respondents of 522 members at the time), regarding: **a** Our main discipline; **b** other disciplines that we mobilize; **c** our main field of education; and **d** our cross-disciplinary collaborations

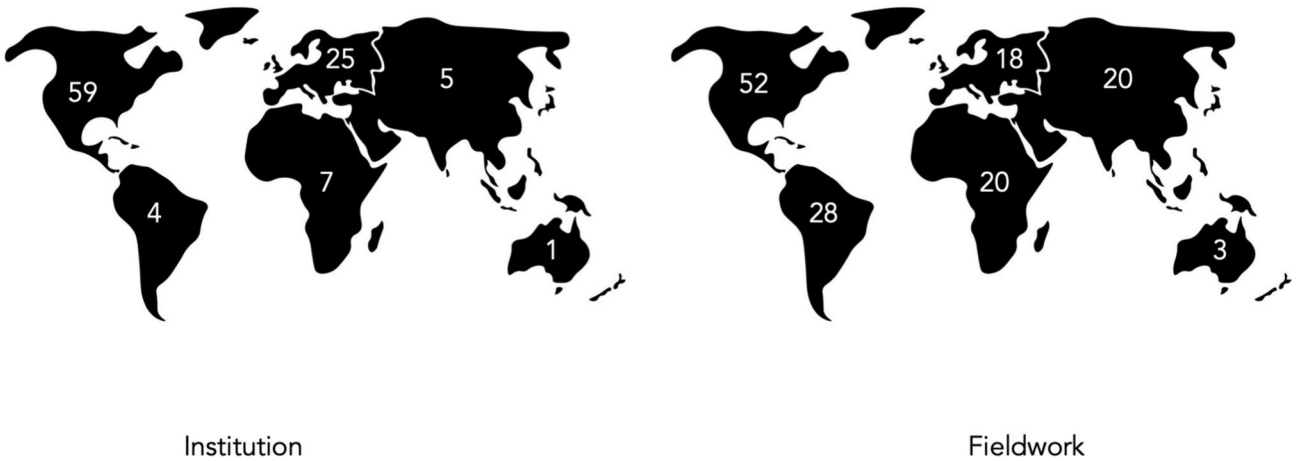

Fig. 2. Geographical distribution of institutions and fieldwork sites reported by SEB members who responded to a survey questionnaire that was available online in February 2022 ($N = 108$ respondents who provided responses to the questions: "In which continent is your current institution based?", and "in which continent(s) do you do most of your work?")

"economic" in the name was initially seen as a way to align research with funding opportunities and to attract students to the field (Gilbert et al. 1958). With the founding of the Society, Richard Evans Schultes described economic botany as "*quite patently a blanket term signifying many facets of the study of plants as they touch human life*" (Gilbert et al. 1958). Although originally broad in scope, the term has acquired new meanings over time. However, the central mission of the SEB has remained the same and is dedicated to the past, present, and future use of plants and fungi by humankind.

In June 2023, the Society took a historic step by adopting a new name, the *Society for Ethnobotany*, maintaining the same acronym, SEB. This change followed years of dialogue and reflection, membership surveys, and votes. In 2021, then SEB President John de la Parra proposed a solution, approved by the Council, that asked the Ethics Committee, the (DEI) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee, and the Student Committee to provide guidance on next steps for a potential name change. In December 2021, these three committees submitted a joint report recommending a process to consider a name change, suggesting a virtual forum for all members to discuss options followed by a ranked choice vote. In February 2022, a survey questionnaire was electronically distributed to all members with the objective of better understanding the academic focus of the SEB community. At that time, the Society had 522 members, of whom 108 responded to the survey, a 21% response rate. Of those who responded, 58 members (54%) mentioned ethnobotany as their main discipline, or as one of the disciplines they mobilize, whereas only 6 members (6%) mentioned economic botany as their main or other discipline (see Fig. 1). In March 2022, the Society hosted an open virtual forum to discuss the name change, and in April 2022, the Society participated in a ranked-choice vote to preliminarily select a preferred name. That vote resulted in 57% of members preferring the name *Society for Ethnobotany* above all other choices (including no name change). A subsequent official vote on four bylaws amendments took place later that year, resulting in the following outcomes: 78% of members approved the amendment to officially change the name of the society to the *Society for Ethnobotany*, 93% approved the amendment to add the term "ethnobotany" to any instance of the term economic botany in the bylaws, 68% approved the removal of bylaws references to "Economic Botany" as the name of the Society's official journal, and 83% approved the change of the name of the award of Distinguished Economic Botanist to Distinguished Ethnobotanist. With two-thirds approval needed, all amendments were passed.

Building on this momentum, the journal will also adopt a new name. Beginning January 1, 2026, *Economic Botany* will become *Ethnobotany and Economic Botany*. This decision was the outcome of extensive deliberations by the SEB Council after the Society's name change and was approved by a majority vote during the Council meeting on August 8, 2023. The Council initially considered *Ethnobotany* as a standalone title, as it directly mirrors the Society's new name. However, this option was unavailable, as it is already used by another registered journal. Furthermore, some council members also expressed the need to signal continuity with the term *Economic Botany*, a name that has carried the Society's scholarship and reputation for more than 75 years. They emphasized that the term represented the brand and history of the journal. We therefore found consensus in a dual title that embodies both continuity and renewal, preserving the legacy and recognizability of research that addresses peoples' livelihoods and the diverse practical uses of plants and fungi around the world while embracing the broader, interdisciplinary scope that ethnobotany communicates. The economic dimensions of plant use remain important to local, national, and global agendas. In recent decades, they have been increasingly reframed within policy discourse related to the bioeconomy, a framework many governments now use to guide sustainable development strategies (Vogelpohl and Töller 2021). The new journal title thus offers a timely opportunity to reflect on these shifting paradigms and to consider how ethnobotany and economic botany, together, inform the multiple dimensions of research today, particularly for communities whose well-being depends on their biological resources.

The new dual journal name also acknowledges the dynamic nature of terminology and language, and reflects the perspectives of a new generation of scholars whose education, opportunities,

worldviews, and sensitivities differ from those of earlier decades. Many of these scholars now engage with human–plant relationships through lenses shaped by social justice, research ethics, sustainability, and decolonial thought. Council discussions, which included input from student representatives, revealed that most younger scholars identify more strongly with *ethnobotany* as a term that captures the relational and interdisciplinary nature of their work, extending beyond the utilitarian or commercial value of plants and fungi. The new title thus opens space for broader scholarship.

"*What's in a Name*?" Economic Botany Versus Ethnobotany

Economic botany and ethnobotany share overlapping but distinct origins. Economic botany appears to be the older term, first emerging in the early nineteenth century to describe the study of useful plants in agriculture, medicine, forestry, and industry. These fields were only formally separated from botany in the late nineteenth century, when "pure" botany was differentiated from applied agricultural science (Wickens 1990). The term "economic" derives from the Greek *oikonomikos*, meaning " household management" and "utility" rather than financial profit alone. Botany, also from Greek roots, means "to eat, or fodder." Deeply tied to the development of systematic and other "pure" research, economy was linked to botany by scholars such as Linnaeus through publications such as *Flora Oeconomica* in 1749, which examined plants in Sweden with human uses, and *Economia Naturae* in 1749, a dissertation that explored interactions between organisms and the environment, paving the way for studies of ecology, even as those were rooted in theology.

As European empires expanded and global trade intensified, these multiple meanings of "economic" became increasingly entangled. Economic botany, once referring broadly to plants of utility or sustenance, became intertwined with colonial and commercial enterprises that privileged crops and commodities of market value. A landmark in this transition was J.D. Hooker's *The Flora of British India* (1875–1897), a monumental seven-volume work cataloguing more than 14,000 species across the subcontinent (covering regions of present-day India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Tibet, Bangladesh, Burma [Myanmar], Ceylon [Sri Lanka], and the Malayan Peninsula). Although presented as a scientific and taxonomic achievement, it also reflected and advanced the British imperial project by identifying plants of potential economic value and by systematizing knowledge derived from local collectors and Indigenous persons whose contributions were routinely left uncredited. Hooker's work epitomized how "pure" and "economic" botany became mutually reinforcing within the framework of empire, where the classification of biodiversity also facilitated its extraction and commodification. Thus, "economic" came to imply both household/community well-being and cash-oriented production systems, a duality that persists today. Contemporary definitions describe economic botany as "the study of the identification, properties, uses, and distribution of economic plants," while the Society's original constitution defined it more expansively as "all activities which pertain to the past, present, and future uses of plants by man" (Wickens 1990).

Yet the same histories that elevated "useful plants" have also normalized extractive research and commodity logics. The present journal name change is therefore not merely descriptive, but also reflective in intent. It invites us to reconsider how we define, practice, teach, and conduct research within this scholarly field. The field has too often objectified plants as mere resources, rather than recognizing them as our extended kin within the cultural, ecological, and spiritual relationships we co-create with them (Gunasekara et al. 2025; Salmón 2000). These relationships with the more-than-human world are deeply rooted in reciprocity, responsibility, and respect. For many Indigenous Peoples and local communities, this relational cosmology and worldview position knowledge as arising through kinship with the natural world, calling for honoring Indigenous ways of knowing (Kimmerer 2013; Smith 2012). In contrast, much of modern scientific thought emerged from Cartesian philosophy, which is grounded in the notion of a fundamental separation between humans and nature. The Cartesian division of mind and matter advanced a mechanistic view of the world as a system of discrete parts to be studied, classified, and controlled (Descartes 1637; Wickens 1990).

These philosophical and historical divisions, later reinforced by the industrial era's acceleration and capitalism, continue to shape how science approaches the study of plants, often viewing them as objects rather than relational beings. Indigenous and local knowledge systems remind us of other ways of being and knowing, inviting us to reimagine plants not as passive materials or resources for extraction within a mechanistic world but as participants in our shared ecological and cultural lives (Kimmerer 2013; Smith 2012).

Ethnobotany, as coined by John W. Harshberger in 1895, was defined as the study of plants in relation to the customs and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples (Wickens 1990). Early ethnobotanical studies were primarily descriptive, documenting plants and their uses, but the field has since evolved to address broader questions about the dynamic relationships between people and plants. While economic botany historically emphasized plants as resources for economic development, ethnobotany expands this perspective to encompass the social, cultural, and ecological dimensions of human–plant interactions. Ethnobotany's development as an academic field of inquiry can be viewed within the six overlapping phases of ethnobiology, the broader discipline that examines human relationships with plants, animals, and all other living beings. Phase I focused on documenting plant and animal uses for the benefit of the researcher's society; Phase II incorporated cognitive approaches to understand how cultures perceive and classify organisms; Phase III emphasized traditional ecological knowledge; Phase IV highlighted Indigenous perspectives and the rights of traditional knowledge holders; Phase V called for interdisciplinary collaboration to address pressing socio-environmental challenges; and Phase VI encourages scholars to critically reflect on historical and ongoing inequities in the field and to pursue research that is inclusive, context-sensitive, and attentive to the contributions and rights of Indigenous, diasporic, and local communities (Clément 1998; Hunn 2007; McAlvay et al. 2021; Nabhan et al. 2011; Wolverton 2013; Wyndham et al. 2011). Together, these phases illustrate how ethnobotany bridges scientific inquiry with cultural knowledge, lived experience, and ecological understanding, guiding the field toward more thoughtful and engaged scholarship.

In its early years, economic botany as reported in the journal was largely armchair scholarship, with few articles based on fieldwork. This has changed dramatically. Between 2020 and 2025, more than 80% of articles report results of field research. This has been accompanied by the adoption of hypothesis testing, often employing quantitative methods and/or laboratory work (Gaoue et al. 2017; Voeks et al. 2012). Early authors seemed little concerned with the issue of intellectual property. Indeed, one author in the 1960s bristled at the idea that Indigenous Peoples considered plant knowledge to be their "private property" (Perry 1961), reflecting a time when such knowledge was largely regarded as a shared heritage of humankind. Today, the question of how best to acknowledge and respectfully engage with the intellectual property of Indigenous, local, and diasporic communities is a central concern in ethnobotany and continues to be actively discussed and debated among SEB members. We recognize, however, that the implementation of these ethical commitments and best practices may vary across regions, shaped by differing legal frameworks, research traditions, and access regulations. These global disparities underscore the need for ongoing dialogue and collaboration to foster thoughtful, context-sensitive research (Vandebroek et al. 2025).

A 2025 journal issue (Vol. 79, Issue 3) showcases research that is more global, interdisciplinary, and theory-driven. Of the ten papers published, five are highlighted here to illustrate the journal's breadth. In Bhutan, Gyeltshen et al. (2025) compare local perceptions of climate change impacts on useful alpine plants with ecological monitoring data. While communities report declines in the availability, quality, and potency of key species (particularly incense plants), ecological measurements show no overall decrease in their abundance. The study reveals that climate impacts are experienced less through changes in species numbers than through increasing environmental variability, unpredictability, and the growing unreliability of key resources. In China, Xie and Jim (2025) map the illegal online trade of endangered *Taxus* species, providing a quantitative assessment of e-commerce–driven biodiversity exploitation. Pombo Geertsma et al. (2025) document the fading yet symbolically

rich practice of Saint John's bouquets in the Netherlands, showing how these floral traditions sustain local cultural heritage and beliefs about protection against lightning strikes. Yessoufou et al. (2025) advance ethnobotanical theory by challenging conventional interpretations of phylogenetic clustering in medicinal plant selection. Using data from northern Nigeria, they propose a conceptual framework that integrates multiple evolutionary scenarios to show that human plant selection cannot be simply labeled "random" or "non-random." Their analysis reveals mixed selection patterns across plant organs and a convergence of medicinal properties even among distantly related species, urging greater nuance in linking cultural choice with evolutionary relationships. Finally, Gunasekara et al. (2025) highlight the conservation and cultural importance of the indigenous Hawaiian coconut variety *Niu Hiwa*, situating it within broader efforts to safeguard plant genetic diversity and traditional knowledge. Together, these studies illustrate the journal's evolution toward scholarship that integrates ecological science, cultural meaning, evolutionary biology, and applied conservation of biocultural heritage, offering broad insights of both theoretical and practical relevance.

Both economic botany and ethnobotany are deeply entangled with colonial histories. Economic botany was closely linked to plantation economies, resource extraction, and the scientific agendas of empire or other dominant groups, instrumentalizing Indigenous and traditional knowledge systems for imperial benefit and contributing to what would later be recognized as bioprospecting and biopiracy (Drayton 2000; Society of Ethnobiology 2020; Voeks and Greene 2018). Early ethnobotanical studies, in turn, frequently "othered" and exoticized Indigenous knowledge, interpreting it through Western academic frameworks rather than on its own terms. In doing so, accounts documented cultural loss without acknowledging the forces driving this disruption (Albuquerque et al. 2025; Zank et al. 2025). Ethical practice in ethnobotanical research remains a living process, shaped by emerging insights, community perspectives, and evolving standards of responsible scholarship (Albuquerque et al. 2025; Vandebroek et al. 2025). Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the importance of critically examining historical legacies, fostering collaborative and respectful research approaches, and pursuing transformative change (Teixidor-Toneu et al. 2026; Zank et al. 2025).

The interpretation of what constitutes ethnobotany or economic botany remains a matter of academic debate, including whether one encompasses the other. Even terms that seem neutral, such as "plant use," or "community outreach" carry conceptual weight. Framing plants primarily as resources can obscure the reciprocal relationships emphasized in many Indigenous and local knowledge systems, where plants are understood as relatives, partners, or living beings. "Outreach" often implies a one-way transmission of knowledge from experts to communities. Alternative terms such as *human–plant relationships*, *plant kinship*, or *plant knowledge* highlight these relational and cultural dimensions. Likewise, "in-reach" centers on building connections by bringing diverse voices into the academic community and fostering two-way dialogue. Reflecting on our language encourages ongoing discussion within the Society, across our disciplines and beyond, and shows the evolving values and responsibilities of scholarship (McAlvay et al. 2021; McClatchey 2005; Orr and Vandebroek 2023). These discussions extend beyond terminology to consider how the field recognizes and engages with Indigenous and local knowledge systems, highlighting the ongoing effort to acknowledge diverse perspectives and address historical inequities (McAlvay et al. 2021; Teixidor-Toneu et al. 2026).

Looking Forward

Research on the economic and livelihood dimensions of non-industrial and subsistence agriculture, non-timber forest products, medicinal plants, and wild-harvested plants and fungi will continue to be welcomed by the journal. Just as the journal's earliest issues reflected the priorities of their historical moment, today's research invites us to engage with contemporary discourse, global perspectives, and the priorities of our membership, including attention to the legacies of marginalization within the field (Fatur 2024). The new title, *Ethnobotany and Economic Botany*, signals a broader and more

inclusive vision, one that recognizes the richness and complexity of Indigenous, diasporic, and community-based traditional knowledge systems that have long shaped human–plant relationships but were often underrepresented in earlier scholarship (Mabry et al. 2024).

Ethnobotany and Economic Botany will continue to publish original research articles, brief reports (notes on culturally important plants), reviews, and invited perspectives that explore the ancestral or traditional knowledge, cultural meanings, values, perceptions, uses, and management practices associated with plants and fungi, as well as the ecosystems in which they grow, whether captured through ethnography, surveys, ecological modeling, economic analysis, historical research, or other methodologies. Our journal prioritizes scholarship that is community-based (conducted by, with, and for communities) and that responds to community interests. We especially prioritize work that moves beyond descriptive plant inventories to address research questions, theory, or hypotheses engaging critically with cultural, ecological, economic, social, linguistic, archeological, ethical, or other aspects of human–plant relationships, plant knowledge, and use (Orr and Vandebroek 2023). We will also continue to develop Special Issues on emerging topics to advance the discipline into new areas of inquiry.

After January 1, 2026, new articles will be published under the title *Ethnobotany and Economic Botany*, while the ISSN (International Standard Serial Number), a unique identifier for the journal, will remain unchanged. Clarivate, the organization that maintains the Web of Science citation database and calculates journal impact factors, will continue to track citations for articles published under both the old and new journal names. Because the journal title is changing, there may be a transitional period of one to two years during which the journal's impact factor could fluctuate. This occurs not because citations are lost, but because Clarivate's database requires time to fully integrate the new title and its articles into the appropriate subject categories and citation calculations. Other major indexing services will continue to list the journal without interruption, and all previously published articles remain fully citable using their original information.

The transition to *Ethnobotany and Economic Botany* does not alter our editorial standards, the rigor of peer review, or the Society's values. Rather, it reaffirms our shared responsibility to support and promote scientific research, education, and respectful knowledge-sharing that brings diverse voices into the conversation, exploring the past, present, and future uses of plants as well as the complex relationships between plants, peoples, and cultures worldwide. Since the 1950s, the number of journals devoted to human–plant relationships has grown substantially, and Open Access outlets often enjoy higher impact factors and wider visibility. Yet, with an H-index of approximately 80 (meaning that at least 80 journal publications have been cited 80 times), *Economic Botany* ranks among the most influential journals in its field. The H-index reflects the journal's longstanding record of publishing research that is both widely read and frequently cited. Its enduring impact rests not only on the journal's history, but even more so on the collective contributions of our Society members who serve as reviewers, editors, and contributing authors.

Our journal continues as a hybrid publication, offering authors the choice to publish at minimal cost through Society membership, which includes reduced-fee categories to promote broad accessibility and participation, or via Open Access. Members enjoy complimentary access to all volumes of the journal published since 1947. Published articles are actively promoted through the Society's social media channels and discussed during online membership events. The editorial board and reviewers include Society members, providing authors with rigorous and constructive peer review to ensure high-quality scholarship.

We warmly invite our members to help strengthen *Ethnobotany and Economic Botany* by submitting impactful and innovative research and by serving as reviewers to uphold the highest standards of academic excellence. We also look forward to welcoming new members, authors, reviewers, and readers, and hope that our journal's new name will diversify, expand, and strengthen our existing membership. We will continue to engage with ongoing academic debates on the evolving meaning and relevance of ethnobotany and economic botany for new generations, always welcoming the feedback from our Society members and readers. As Albuquerque (2025) cautions, "scientific pluralism

does not automatically entail epistemic fluidity." Although the broader discipline of ethnobiology is widely praised for its diversity of methods, interacting disciplines, and knowledge systems, yet this plurality alone does not guarantee meaningful dialogue across epistemic boundaries. Without intentional efforts to cultivate dialogical pluralism, in which approaches actively challenge, inform, and enrich one another, these diverse perspectives risk remaining parallel, constraining productive exchange among methods, epistemologies, and cultural knowledge. We are especially excited to see the youthful cohort of our membership contribute fresh perspectives and innovative research to these and other ongoing discussions.

The journal name change is a vital step in embracing a transformative moment. It affirms our dedication to building a knowledge foundation that honors cultural knowledge systems, uplifts the complex relationships between plants, fungi, and peoples across cultures and landscapes, and equips us to address some of the most urgent environmental, social, and cultural challenges facing humanity today. More than colleagues, we are a community united by a shared commitment to advancing scholarship that is rigorous, inclusive, and attentive to the diversity and richness of human–plant relationships worldwide.

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