Ethnobotany and Ethnocide: an interview with Wade Davis

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Wade Davis did not set out for Harvard University with the intention of studying anthropology and ethnobotany. Growing up in the forests of British Columbia, he was raised to view the trees as resources waiting to be used. Even the science classes in school were aimed at preparing students for jobs as future loggers. These ideas contrasted sharply with those of Davis' friends in the First Nations, the indigenous peoples of Canada to whom the forests had deep spiritual significance. His viewpoint has since changed, and he is currently working to save the vast alpine basin in northern British Columbia – known as the Sacred Headwaters – from destructive mining.

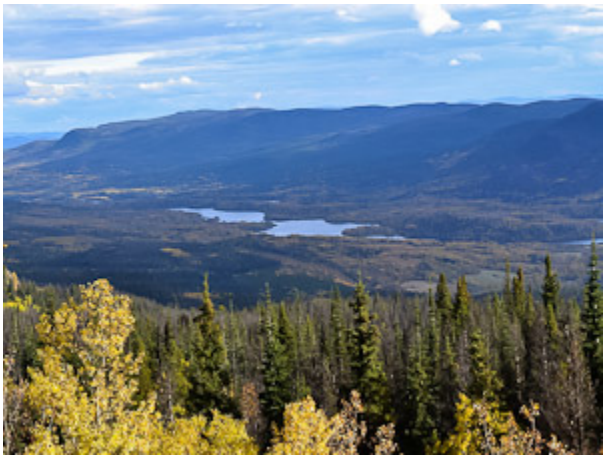
Davis received a bachelor's degree in anthropology and biology and a Ph.D. in ethnobotany, all from Harvard University. I asked Davis what initially attracted him to the fields of anthropology and ethnobotany.

Davis: I didn't really decide to study anthropology. The deadline at Harvard for declaring a major was the next day, and I happened to come out of the Peabody Museum with this sort of astonishment at the dioramas of the fantastic images from cultures around the world when I bounced into a friend of mine on a street corner. I asked him what he was going to study, and he said "ethnology and ethnography." I said, "What's that?" He replied: "You read about Indians? That's an ethnography there." And that's how I became an anthropologist.

Similar circumstances led him to the field of ethnobotany. He met with the father of ethnobotany, Richard Evan Schultes, then a professor at Harvard. Though Davis had never taken a biology course and had little knowledge of science or plants, he told Schultes that he wanted to go to South America to cultivate specimens. Schultes evidently had faith in Davis because he asked him, "Well son, when do you want to go?" Two weeks later, Davis was in the Amazon.

Davis has traveled extensively with the support of the Harvard Botanical Museum, for which he spent three years in the Andes Mountains and Amazon rainforest as a plant explorer. In South America, he

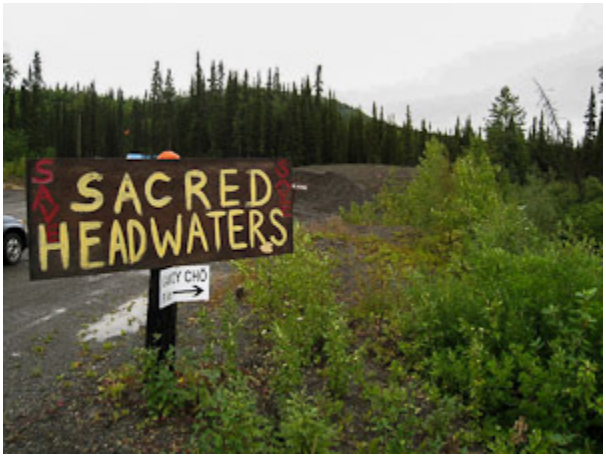
traveled across eight nations and lived with numerous indigenous groups. While living among these different peoples, Davis made around 6,000 botanical collections.



Davis has published a number of other scientific articles on topics ranging from the ethnobotany of South American Indians to the traditional use of psychopathic drugs. He is also an accomplished director and continues to produce films about everything from disappearing cultures to hallucinogenic plants. In a recent film, Peyote to LSD: A Psychedelic Odyssey, Davis examines his former professor Richard Evans Schultes' work and his discovery of hallucinogenic plants that gained popularity in the sixties, and how hallucinogens are used in ceremonies throughout the world.

In many of his works, Davis has emphasized the idea of cultural loss, or ethnocide, and what we can do to preserve it. I asked him to elaborate more on what he believes culture is and why there are so many cultures victim to ethnocide.

Davis: Culture is not trivial or decorative. It's essentially the body of romantic values that we place around individuals to keep the barbaric heart that lays within all of us at bay. It is culture that creates civilizations, and people are torn within the constraints of culture.



Cultures are not destined to stay the same. Humans are causing culture loss. You know, we

universally condemn genocide, which is the extinction of a people, but we have not condemned ethnocide – which is the end of people's way of life and is frequently legitimized in public policy – in many quarters of the development community. Wherever you go, these are not delicate, quaint peoples. They are not failed attempts at being modern, or failed attempts at being like us. In every case, they're dynamic, living people. The forces afflicting them can be egregious industrial decisions, very often in the guise of the cult of modernity, whereby nation states are essentially embarrassed by the existence or example of nomadic peoples in their country. There are people who pursue ownership of the land with the excuse of bringing them into the modern mainstream… when really it's just a way to get them off the lands so they can access the resources.

Davis has studied the impact of globalization and modernity on indigenous peoples all over the world. In his most recent book, The Wayfinders*, Davis examined indigenous societies from Polynesia to the Amazon to Nepal and discussed the losses the world will face if we continue to force foreign cultures to mold to our Western ideologies. I asked Davis to talk about the spread of modernity and how it affects indigenous peoples around the world.*

Davis: The spread of modernity is based on the presumption that if people buy into the dictates of our particular way of life, not only will they achieve the affluence that so few of us enjoy, but that life is inherently better than whatever they have been pursuing. And yet there's not a single way to see if the development paradigm is really a form of good life. Life expectancy may go up, but it just may mean that mortality comes down. Even something that's celebrated like education and literacy – and there's nothing wrong with literacy or education – but they're all external pressures. What is the context in which education is celebrated?

In northern Kenya, for example, the pastoral nomads, in order to have one foot in the cash economy, will send a child off to school to become educated. There's nothing wrong with that, but the problem is the school systems themselves. They reflect the values of states, and nomadic peoples do not fit into their idea of modernity. So their kids come into school as nomads, and they're learning things they've never seen, but in this context it teaches them to have contempt for their families and their conditions. So they graduate, but they can't go back; they graduate not as nomads but as clerks, who then enter an… economy in the modern nation state of Kenya, which has a huge unemployment rate for high school graduates. They've been taught to be ashamed of who they are, so they can't go back to their traditions… so they drift in Nairobi, where they scratch for a living at the edges of the cash economy. Statistically, that's considered a great advance.

The point isn't the traditional versus the modern; it's the rights of the free people to choose the components of their lives in a context that reflects the integrity of who they are. At the same time, how do we find a way for all peoples to benefit from the genius of modernity without amending their ethnicity?

The assumption that there's this subjective thing called modernity, to which all cultures should drift, is completely disingenuous. Modernity is simply a word to describe the way one small segment of each population is organized. It's economic consumption, political activities, and the conceit that this way of life… is the paragon of humanity's potential.

If a Martian anthropologist came to the United States, he or she or it would see a number of wonderful things, but if they looked at our social structure, they might ask questions. They might also question our economic system, which is based on a model of interaction with the earth that is probably not sustainable. So you see, we're making wonderful things, but the paragon of humanity's potential we most assuredly are not.

The sort of cultural myopia that is celebrated with intensity by almost all cultures is something we simply cannot afford anymore as we move to a truly multicultural pluralistic world in which all people have the benefits of the genius of modernity, because every culture has something to teach the world.

Lastly, I asked Davis what he was currently working on and when we could expect to see the results.

Davis: I have two books coming out this fall. One is called *Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory, and the Conquest of Everest*. It's the product of twelve years of exhaustive research examining the first attempts of British climbs in view of the background of the Great War. This is a very monumental book that's getting largely positive reviews. The second book is called *The Sacred Headwaters: The Fight to Save the Stakine, Skeena, and Nass.*

Into the Silence was released October 18, 2011, and examines the effects of the First World War on countries around the world, and how these effects were channeled into their efforts to summit Mt. Everest. *The Sacred Headwaters* [was] released January 10, 2012, and features photographs of the Spatsizi Wilderness along with descriptions of the landscape and the current attempts to introduce open-pit copper and gold mines.

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