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Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

Knowledge conservation

Dr Maria Fadiman is an ethnobotanist – she studies how people use plants. ‘Looking at plant conservation without including people is a fantasy,’ she says. ‘The focus of my work is finding a balance where people use resources in a sustainable way.’

It struck Fadiman early on that this was what she wanted to do. ‘I was born with a passion for conservation and a fascination with indigenous cultures,’ she explains. ‘Ethnobotany lets me bring it all together. On my first trip to the rain forest I met a woman who was in terrible pain because the people in her village weren’t able to remember which plant would cure her. I saw traditional plant knowledge was being lost, and at that moment I knew conserving this kind of knowledge was what I wanted to do with my life.’

Visiting the Ecuadorian rain forest, Dr Fadiman was amazed at the variety of plants. ‘It looked like one big, green mish-mash to me’, she says. ‘But the people who lived there were able to pick out the right plants for medicine and could distinguish not only the plants that were safe to eat, but also the right part of each plant.’

The problem often is that such knowledge is stored only in local people’s minds and it is passed down from generation to generation. Fadiman managed to persuade inhabitants of the Ecuadorian rain forest to let her record the information in written form. ‘They are excited by this idea because suddenly their knowledge is valued.’

But conservation doesn’t just mean protecting indigenous plants. If bringing in non-native plants – cash crops like coffee – is beneficial to people and the environment, then that’s fine too. In the Galapagos Islands, where overfishing was a real problem, environmentalists like Fadiman succeeded in getting local people to think about alternatives to fishing, such as growing coffee.

By forming close relationships with local people and joining in with their way of life, Fadiman has inspired her own students in her teaching at Florida Atlantic University. Students who couldn’t easily absorb facts and statistics said they were able to engage much more easily with the subject when they heard her stories of going to the river to brush her teeth or sitting around a cooking fire.

indigenous (adj) /ɪnˈdɪdʒənəs/ native to a particular country or area

mish-mash (n) /ˈmɪʃˌmaʃ/ a confusing mixture or collection of things

Life