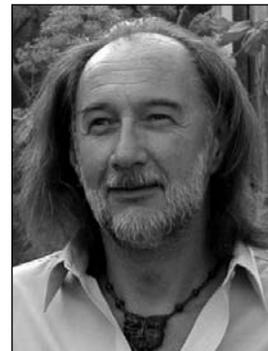


Interview with David Hoffmann

by Patricia Kyritsi Howell, RH (AHG)



Medical herbalist David Hoffmann has been a political activist for decades. As a Green Party candidate in Wales in 1983, he stood for election to a seat in the UK Parliament. After moving to the United States, he was a founding member and past president of the American Herbalists Guild. He now serves on the advisory boards of both the American Botanical Council and United Plant Savers. He has published 17 books, teaches at the California School of Herbal Studies in northern California, and is a visiting faculty member of Bastyr University in Washington state.

A Fellow of Britain's National Institute of Medical Herbalists and a practicing phytotherapist for thirty years, Hoffmann is a leader in the debate about the ecological impact of the increasing demand for herbal products in the expanding global herb marketplace. I spoke with David by phone at his office at Traditional Medicinals in northern California.

Howell: When you were studying to become a medical herbalist, how much did conservation issues influence the *materia medica* you used?

Hoffmann: In none of my training was there any mention of conservation. The silence stood out to me, because I had just finished getting a degree in conservation biology and had sort of a paranoid ecological perspective that caused me to really look at conservation issues. At that time I felt that ecological collapse was imminent. I suddenly realized that if I had not done any botany studies before beginning my herbalist training, I could have earned my degree without ever seeing a plant! All of our tinctures were made with dry herbs. I was accustomed to using a lot of lady's slipper, and thought it was a great herb, but I guess

I should have known by its cost alone that it was an endangered plant. I started to push the National Institute in Britain to look at conservation issues.

Howell: How do conservation issues influence your herb choices today? Do you take the conservation status of a plant into consideration before deciding to write or teach about it?

Hoffmann: Conservation is a major part of everything I do now. When choosing herbs for patients, aside from clinical considerations, there have to be good selection criteria. I will always verify that the individual plants selected are ecologically sound. If faced with several herb choices that would work clinically, I do some research and look at databases for information on each plant. I'm not referring to medical databases, but to alternative agricultural data bases where you can find this kind of information.

The three guidelines I insist on are aesthetics, economics, and ecology. For me, the ecological issues trump the others. I believe that maintaining human health does not justify doing more damage to the environment. Many herbs are endangered and their conservation is very important. But we must also practice pre-emptive conservation by looking at other issues, for example, the environmental cost of shipping plants from one part of the planet to another, which uses an enormous amount of resources.

Saw palmetto, nettle root, and pygeum are three herbs used to treat urinary tract problems. Pygeum is endangered, though it is cultivated, but it is still listed on CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) and on conservation watch worldwide. Saw palmetto and nettle root are weedy and

A Fellow of Britain's National Institute of Medical Herbalists, David Hoffmann has been a phytotherapist for over 25 years and is one of the founding members and a past president of the American Herbalists Guild. He is the author of fifteen books including *The Holistic Herbal*, *An Elders' Herbal*, *An Herbal Guide to Stress Relief*, and a textbook on science and clinical skills, *Therapeutic Herbalism*.



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abundant, so why is the herb industry pushing the use of pygeum? There is no therapeutic reason. Herbalists need to answer the wake up call and recognize that medicinal plants are part of a whole ecology system, a conscious, living system.

Howell: Why is the herbal products industry pushing plants like pygeum? Is this an example of how globalization affects herbal practice and the herbs we choose to work with?

Hoffmann: Globalization is an immensely negative force. There are really not big enough words to describe how bad it is. And it is affecting everything, not just herbal practitioners and herb conservation. Globalization really distorts an herbalists' worldview. What needs to happen is for all herbalists to take an honest look at how globalization is influencing our lives in general and reassess the role of the herbalist in the global, capitalist world. By its very nature, the herbal products industry is part of globalization because it is constantly seeking new and better herbs to sell. Seeing medicinal plants as merely a commodity, as something that is not part of the family of life, is a threat to herbalism. In the global, corporate context, selling herbs has become just another profit stream for capitalists. I would really like to see the herbal products industry deconstructed.

Howell: What responsibility do herbalists have in the plant conservation movement regarding corporate-dominated business and globalization?

Hoffmann: As much responsibility as everyone else. We must all wake up and do something. In my work as a teacher and writer, I always emphasize the importance of plant quality and locally-made products from each region. The shift toward bioregionalism in herbalism is a move in the right direction. Herbs need to be seen as gifts of nature that come into our lives, and we are changed by the experience. Instead, corporations are selling the idea that herbs are like drugs; just a substitute and basically the same.

Looking at the history of herbalism, it seems that some sort of reaction, usually something economic, always sidetracks the nature-based essence of the herbal

experience. When the herbal renaissance was set in motion during the 1960s, there was a profound insight into the spirit of the garden and we really felt the presence of Gaia, the Earth, as a living conscious being. The emphasis has shifted away from awareness of the intention that went into gathering the plant, or on the need to walk lightly in every way possible on Earth. Whenever we choose herbs now, it all comes down to the scientific claims that can legally be printed onto labels.

A good example is the medicinal cannabis controversy. Excellent research is being done that shows the clear benefits. But there is one problem; cannabis is a plant, and one that the establishment doesn't like, so the science isn't being used. Instead we see a knee-jerk reaction against it simply because it is a plant and not a drug. This is a clear case of oppression and bias. For the FDA to say there is no evidence to support the medicinal use of cannabis is a sign of serious eyesight problems by this organization.

Howell: Are you suggesting that clinical herbalists who are concerned about the larger ecological issues that result from individual herb choices need to strictly use plants that are abundant in our bioregions?

Hoffmann: A year ago I would have said that it is not possible to use imported herbs without raising sustainability issues. When a mother treats her sick child with plants that were grown or harvested somewhere else in an ecologically damaging way, her herb choices contribute bigger problems that affect us all. But now, because of the work of groups like the Medicinal Plant Specialist Group under the IUCN (World Conservation Union), I am seeing things a little differently. There are ways that using fair trade and organic growing practices can make it possible to use plants from other parts of the world, but there are few companies willing to go to the trouble to get their herbs in this way.

And although I see myself as an anti-corporate person, I acknowledge that there are herb companies who are using fair trade policies to establish good relationships with farmers, and supporting good agricultural practices. These companies are setting up viable small-scale distribution networks in places like Russia and Guatemala. Today, I can say that it is

possible, in a sustainable way, to get herbs that only grow in other parts of the world. However, we are still left to deal with the problem of the high cost of resources needed to transport these crops. I don't know how this can ever be resolved.

Even with these few positive things happening, a better way to go is to empower small, local groups. We need herbalists to fill this role in their own village or community. We need to bridge farming with making herb products, clinical practice, and education. We need to educate the average herb shopper about the importance of buying products that are green in some way, even if that whole idea is being abused by multinational corporations. We need to spread the word that when you put your herb dollars into the local, organically grown marketplace and not into the corporate marketplace where "supplements" are sold, you are making a big difference while naturally becoming part of an ecological and economic solution.

Howell: Many clinical herbalists in North America have come to rely heavily on Chinese and Ayurvedic tonic herbs. Can we really get the same therapeutic results if we limit our herb choices to plants cultivated or wild crafted regionally?

Hoffmann: I don't think that Oriental medicine is any richer in herbal tonics. We have lots of regional alteratives and organ specific tonics that are very adaptogenic; however, there is a difference in the way that writers and teachers talk about our Western herbs. Part of the problem has to do with where the herb research is coming from. We have lots of Western herbs with adaptogenic properties but most of ones that we read about in the herbal literature are Asian, Russian, or Indian adaptogens because those are the countries doing the research. We simply don't have serious herb research being done by North American or European scientists. I believe that all our system specific tonic herbs may be considered adaptogenic. If I were a student now, I would probably devote myself to herb research, except that I wouldn't want to do animal studies.

Howell: Where can herbalists find reliable information on the conservation status of individual herbs? How do we know which plants we should be using?

Hoffmann: United Plant Savers is going about monitoring the status of medicinal plants in the right way. They assess how threatened individual native plants are, based on environmental information gathered in different parts of North America. United Plants Savers (www.unitedplantsavers.org) maintain up-to-date lists of "At Risk" or "To Watch" plants on their website. The USDA site (<http://plants.usda.gov>) also links together many alternative agricultural databases where you can check on individual herbs. The Missouri Botanical Garden site (www.mobot.org/MOBOT/research/links9.shtml) is also good.

These lists are helpful, but I consider all medicinal herbs on the commercial market to be threatened. When we get caught up in a debate about how threatened an individual plant is, we fail to recognize that capitalism has put all natural resources in a state of planetary peril. Only relying on economic criteria for deciding how threatened a plant is misses the point. Once you assume that all plants are in trouble, you don't even consider using certain wild plants unless they are locally abundant. For me, the only choice that makes sense is the use of organically grown herbs.

Howell: What is herbalism's future, given the context of our current ecological situation?

Hoffmann: I see lots of wailing and gnashing of teeth about the current situation. While I think that economic collapse may be sidestepped, I feel that ecological collapse is nigh. What herbalists can do is regroup on a small scale. We have the supplies in our bioregional herbs, and because of our training as herbalists we have an instant vital and crucial role in our communities. Herbalists are a survival resource. I have given up on changing legislation. Who needs government recognition? We should love political change. Ultimately, I think herbalists must be a human voice for the green, communicating the joy of plants as something that heals as it nurtures, and that illuminates what we are and what we could be.