



“To make visible what the economy has rendered invisible”: Following herbs through the supply chain with Ann Armbrecht

Ann Armbrecht (center) and Terrence Youk (right) capture footage of Danielle Hawkins (left), manager at Trout Lake Farm in Washington state for The Sustainable Herb Project. Photo by Bryce Youk.

Harvard-educated anthropologist and author Ann Armbrecht hit the herbal scene in 2009 with her ground-breaking documentary, *Numen: The Nature of Plants*. Over a decade earlier, upon returning from an 18-month stay in Nepal, this Vermont-based professor and mother of two was drawn to herbalism, whose Earth-honoring philosophy she found resonated spiritually and culturally with her experience with villagers in the Himalayas. Now, she deepens her investigation of the human sense of connection to the planet in her latest work, the Sustainable Herbs Project, set to be released as an interactive documentary in winter 2016. Recently, Ann generously took

the time to answer questions from *JAHG* Editor Anne de Courtenay in the following interview.

Ann, most of us know you from your documentary *Numen: The Nature of Plants*, which explores the role of traditional medicinal herbalism in a vision of sustainable, ecological health care. Your documentary now in production is about following medicinal herbs through the supply chain with a focus on sustainable practices and sources. How did this project grow out of your experience with *Numen*?

We produced *Numen* to celebrate the values at the heart of traditional herbal medicine, to show that it is about much more than tinctures in little brown bottles. As we got into the



Ann Armbrecht at Infusion, the processing facility for Pukka Herbs, an herbal tea and supplement company based in Bristol, UK.

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interviewing for *Numen*, we found that we had to address the herb industry. And so the first edition of the film included a 10-minute section on social and ecological responsibility in the herb industry.

We removed that section in the revised edition for a number of reasons—the length of the film, the complexity of the topic, and also changes in the industry that happened after the film was released, some of which were really surprising to me. I realized that in order to say anything meaningful about the industry, we had to go beyond speaking to the directors of companies and, as my advisor in graduate school always told me: “Follow the object”—in this case, the plants.

I’ve been thinking about some version of this project for years. I thought it would be a book – I’m a writer, not a filmmaker, and I much prefer moving words around on the page to editing video clips. And so the form for this project grew out of *Numen* and my experience especially doing the outreach for that. Seeing what moves people. Seeing what doesn’t.

As an anthropologist whose work has set out to change the world, what is your ultimate goal in the creation of the Sustainable Herbs Project?

Years ago, Wendell Berry spoke about how we as a culture are suffering from a crisis of the imagination. He said, “We can’t see the forests that are clear cut to build the tables in our homes; the lakes being drained to fill our bathtubs. We can’t see the moral and ecological consequences of our ways of living and not seeing those consequences only makes it easier to continue living as we do.”

Around the same time Berry spoke those words, I was teaching my first class in the Environmental Studies Program at Dartmouth. As a final project, I had my students follow one

object from source to finished product. This was in the late 1990s, before there was such a focus on following products through the supply chain. The

last day in class, each student presented what they had discovered. We were all silent as we listened to story after story about the environmental and social impacts caused by producing the objects we used everyday: pencils, keys, copying paper.

Hearing all of that information at once was paralyzing. And yet it also gave us the information we needed to begin to try to do things differently.

That’s a round-about way of answering your question, but my biggest goal is to help us re-connect with the people and places on the other sides of the objects we consume. To make visible what the economy has rendered invisible.

I think herbal medicine is an especially important place to begin. I think a lot about the connections between human and environmental health, how we can’t be well until the planet is well. And yet for the most part, the natural health movement, herbalism included, has taken a very personal, individual approach to promoting natural medicine. We want our medicines to be free of pesticides and heavy metals, but what about choosing medicines that free the whole planet of pesticides and heavy metals? What about thinking about how our healthcare purchases help create a healthier planet? I think herbal medicine should be leading in this. It’s hard. It’s a huge, huge task. But it has to be done. And who better to do it than the herbal community?

To be a bit more specific: I want the herb community to walk our talk. And that starts with knowing a lot more about where our herbs are from and how and by whom our remedies are made. So that’s my immediate goal. And we’ll see about the rest!

The fruit of your research from the Sustainable Herbs Project is set to be shared in an “interactive web documentary.” What features does this medium have, and why did you choose it over a traditional film?

I’m glad you asked this. Lots of people focus on the documentary part – and I want to make it really clear that this won’t be another film like *Numen*. A few reasons: I want to create something that allows the viewer to interact with the information as they choose. There will be video clips of the men and women we

interviewed, footage of different stages of production. Then, for those who want more information on particular topics, there will be ways to access longer interview clips, articles, images, maps, etc. I also want it to be action-oriented. While telling these stories is the heart of the site for me, I want viewers to be able to immediately find information on what they can do about the information they hear.

A full-length documentary requires a huge amount of editing which takes a lot of time and money. I wanted to do this project quickly without having to raise a lot of money or sit behind a computer editing footage. And finally, I like it. I saw a presentation by the producer of *Hollow*, an interactive documentary about rural West Virginia, that intrigued me. It's an interesting mix of different media that can reach different kinds of audiences.

What stage of production are you in right now?

I am going through the footage, editing short clips, gathering material for different sections of the website, transcribing interviews, etc. And I'm working with a team of students from the Digital Arts, Leadership and Innovation (DALI) Lab at Dartmouth College who are designing and developing the site. They are in the design stage now. I love that this project can also be part of a broader experiential learning project for these students. They are fun and curious and excited to try out new things - it's been fantastic.

When do you expect the new documentary (and does it have a title yet?) to be released?

Late winter 2016. So far it's still called "the Sustainable Herbs Project."

How did you select sites for your research for the Sustainable Herbs Project?

What countries did you visit? What sort of facilities did you explore?

Josef Brinckmann, VP of Sustainability at Traditional Medicinals, has been advising me on this project from the beginning. Not only does Josef know an incredible amount about the industry overall, he has done a tremendous



A woman weeds fields of *Melissa officinalis* outside of Plovdiv, Bulgaria.

amount to bring more transparency and attention to social and ecological sustainability to the industry. He put me in touch with Anastasiya Timoshyna, Medicinal Plants Programme Leader for TRAFFIC, who in turn helped me set up visits with Fair Wild certified operators in Hungary and Poland. Because Fair Wild is a new standard, these companies were more open to having a visitor than herb companies typically are. And then I selected sites by following Fair Wild plants through the supply chain and visited the Organic Herb Trading Company and Pukka Herbs in the UK. So that's kind of how I've done it, word of mouth, people suggest other people and I contact them. In the US, I visited farms I've known about for years and then, last minute, some farms that Kickstarter followers suggested. For processing facilities overseas, it's harder.

Did you find any distinct differences (approaches, technique, attitudes, etc.) between farms and processing facilities in the United States and those in Europe?

Yes, there were lots of differences. I plan to explore these differences in much greater depth on the website. I'd rather wait until I've had a chance to go through the footage and interview material before guessing at those differences now or just basing them on my first hand impressions.

What is the typical research experience like when you get to a farm or other facility?

It's so hard to say! Typically though we're shown around. Sometimes given an introduction. Terry would start filming and basically keep the camera rolling. Sometimes we'd do formal interviews, but unlike *Numen*, my goal this time was really to focus on how things are being done with brief interviews along the way. Some people would begin talking right away, with others it took more time. Some people clearly had had a lot of experience behind the camera. Most did not.

I know it's complex, but can you encapsulate the journey a plant takes from grower to consumer – that is, the stops it makes and the time it takes to complete the whole journey?

Oddly enough, the journey is both complex and not complex. My goal is to bring it to life through the words of those doing the work and through images of them doing that work. I'd rather not try to put it into my words here. Best to wait until the website is finished!

Traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic herbalists are growing in number here in the United States. Many of these practitioners source their herbs from Asia. Is there a chance you might travel there to research the supply chain that

originates in that part of the world? How relevant will what you discovered in the making of the upcoming documentary be to herbalists who use herbs from the East?

I agree, it is really important to also visit Asia, especially India and China. We have funding left from the Kickstarter to visit India, which we hope to do this January. I will then need to raise additional funds in order to visit China, which I hope to do the following year. Both of those trips will likely be with individuals sourcing for the companies I've been focusing on just because it is so hard to navigate those worlds on my own and get information that would be meaningful. I've also applied for a grant to spend more time in India exploring these issues in more depth once the Sustainable Herbs Project is up and running.

Your work has exposed you to a side of herbal practice invisible (or at best shrouded) to most professional herbalists, let alone the general public who use herbs. What are the most important considerations and questions a practicing herbalist should ask about botanical source and quality?

In the herb world certain companies tend to be the go-to companies, the ones everyone uses and so everyone trusts. It can be easy to say "Do your homework," but that's hard to do when, as you say, much of that industry is invisible to most of us. My goal with the upcoming website is to provide information so people can make their own decisions and ask the right questions.

That said, I tried to answer some of this in this post on the Sustainable Herb Project blog: <http://www.numenfilm.com/blog/herb-industry/> so I'd say take a look there. And buy organic.

For the individual herbalist asking those questions, is the onus on them to find the answers, or do you think there will be a reliable source that they can turn to for this information?

My hope is for the Sustainable Herbs Project to be that source! I have an advisory council of herbalists and activists who are leaders in these issues in the herb industry, so my plan is to create a place where people can go that isn't a company

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A warehouse in northeast Poland stores medicinal herbs. Each bag is labeled with species, date, collection site, collector ID (if wild collected), or cultivation source to ensure traceability. Many common medicinal plants in the US herb market come from central and eastern Europe.



website. Some companies are doing a really good job on their websites of providing information – but ultimately the goal of those sites is to sell their products. And so I think it is important to have other places to turn to. That said, I think as consumers we all need to take a bit more of the onus on to ourselves for all of our purchases... and so my plan will never be to say buy this product and not that. That decision is up to each of us.

In the United States, herbal manufacturing companies of all sizes, all the way down to individuals creating custom remedies, are expected to conform to GMP guidelines. How do you feel this works within the framework of sustainability and quality? Did you find similar guidelines at work in Europe?

Ah, this is another huge, huge topic. It is the central topic, in a way, everywhere I visited: how to meet more rigorous quality control standards, how to balance sustainability concerns, how to provide fair wages, how to manage customer expectations, needs of workers... I'm afraid I need to bow out again and say... wait for the website! So many of my conversations and interviews focused on different facets of these issues and there is no way I can do justice to the complexity of these issues and the different perspectives in this interview.

Your film and research crew is your family -- your husband filmmaker Terrence Youk did the filming, while your daughter Willow Forbes and son Bryce contributed still photography and other tasks. How long did you travel together, and what impact has this experience had on you as individuals and as a unit?

It was a family trip because we really didn't have any other choice! We couldn't leave our 11-year old son behind for that long. My daughter, 17, spent the previous fall in Central America and has studied photography so she brought a lot of skills that were really helpful – in addition to making it a lot more fun for Bryce. At first I had a lot of trepidation over traveling and doing research with my family in tow, but it turned out to be pretty amazing. Everyone helped out



and contributed in different ways. It wasn't an easy trip. We were moving almost every day and spending long hours following farmers in fields or looking at machinery drying and processing herbs. While that might fascinate me, it is not really so exciting! But our kids were great, they took lots of really good photos, and made the whole trip a lot more fun. We ate a lot of ice cream! And overall, I think it's been nice for them to see this whole process of what it takes to bring a vision to life. The Kickstarter was incredibly stressful – it started out really slowly and then got this amazing momentum. I have no idea how that impacted them but I think it was important, especially for my daughter, to see the importance of having a vision and persevering to make that vision real.

How has this experience changed your vision and practice of herbalism generally, and your own personal relationship to plants?

On one hand, visiting these companies and seeing what industrial scale production looks like motivates me even more to grow and produce my own herbs or to buy them from growers in my region. And yet, on the other, seeing first hand what a difference companies who are working hard to change the supply chain makes to the communities where they work makes me want to support those companies even more.

I think it's deepened my relationship with the plants because it's made me less naïve. Sebastian Pole of Pukka Herbs talked about this in a different way. He said he doesn't worry

Ann's children, Willow Forbes and Bryce Youk, take a break from the Sustainable Herbs Project to hike on Mount Vitoshka, south of Sofia, Bulgaria.

We can't be well until the planet is well. Herbalism as a whole can't be well until the entire supply chain is well.

so much about the machinery and the scale of production that is involved because he sees the quality at the end and has come to see that the machinery per se doesn't impact the plants. Other things do impact the plants. My goal with this project is to help make clear what some of those other things are. It's helped me be more discerning. It's made me reflect on my own biases – and my categories, like what does intention really mean in producing medicine on this scale? What does it look like when it is present? And how can you tell when it isn't? What about cleanliness? What does clean really mean?

It's really driven home the central premise of ecological medicine that we can't be well until the planet is well. Pesticides are showing up in herbs not because farmers are necessarily using them, but because those pesticides are in the water, the soil, the air where those plants are grown. Should those companies suffer because of global inequities that are far more complex than any individual company can ever address? Who should bear the burden? We can simply buy another product, one that is "clean," but what about those who need to irrigate their fields with that water?

I'm doing this project not because I have

easy answers. I'm doing it because I think it is really important that we ask these questions.

It's helped me understand that we can't just look at plants in isolation or our own health or the health of our company or practice. We need to see that herbalism as a whole can't be well until the entire supply chain is well.

Ann, you are an herbalist educated by Rosemary Gladstar and others. Knowing you are busy with travel and documentary production, do you have an herbal practice where you see clients? If so, what does that look like?

Halfway through Rosemary's advanced course I started sneaking out of classes for longer and longer walks in the woods of Sage Mountain. I just couldn't get myself to focus on learning the material in the ways I would need in order to practice. And so while I continue to take herb classes, grow medicinal plants and make lots of herbal remedies, I realized early on I wasn't cut out to be a practitioner. I do meet with a group of friends to practice work that we did in an apprenticeship with Caroline Gagnon, but I do that because I love working

Calendula officinalis drying at Oshala Farm in Applegate Valley, southwestern Oregon. Run by Jeff and Elise Higley, Oshala supplies dried and fresh medicinal herbs for larger companies like Mountain Rose, Pacific Botanicals and Herb Pharm, as well as for smaller customers.



with the plants and these women in this way more than for practice working with clients.

I taught an anthropology class on Asian Medical Systems at Dartmouth College last spring and am teaching a writing course in an MFA program now, and I find that I bring a lot of the values I've learned in herb classes to how I teach. I'm more willing to talk about intuition and spirit, about things we can't see, and I'm more ready to take different sorts of risks in my teaching than I would have before seeing how powerful and important these other dimensions are for understanding health and healing and our place in the world. I haven't thought of it this way before, but maybe that is a way of practicing as an herbalist, just not in the ways I expected.

What inspired you, a Harvard-educated anthropologist, to become an herbalist in the first place?

Deb Soule! I met her shortly after returning from living in northeast Nepal for 18 months. She suggested I attend the Women's Herb Conference. I was amazed at that conference to be surrounded by women speaking from their hearts and their heads, not afraid to talk about what they loved – not afraid even to talk about love. There wasn't a lot of singing hand-in-hand in circles or dancing around fires at Harvard.

But it wasn't only that. In herbal medicine I found something of what I had discovered in rural Nepal: living with a sense of the sacred, a sense of respect and constraint in interacting with the natural world, a sense of limits. I wanted more of it and enrolled in Rosemary Gladstar's apprentice course and since then it's just been a matter of figuring out exactly what my work with plants is meant to be.

Your Kickstarter goal of \$65,000 was reached and exceeded within a month of the campaign launch. Does the Sustainable Herbs Project still need support? If so, how can individuals and groups help?

The support we got was absolutely amazing. That was one of the more stressful months of my life but it was so gratifying to receive such support from so many people. Most of our

donations were around \$35! Which shows that even if you think your support can't make a difference it really can. After Kickstarter fees, award fulfillment and dropped pledges (yep, it happens), we have \$53,000 for the project. These funds will cover all of our travel to date and the trip to India and other fees/expenses through December. I have been teaching part-time to cover my salary so that the Kickstarter funds can go to other expenses, but the project really demands my full attention in order to do it in the best way possible. And so I do need more support! I am seeking funds for the following:

- 6 months of my time;
- 6 months of a part-time assistant (to help with social media, updating the blog, and general outreach);
- Seed money to develop a plan for keeping the site updated and active for at least 5 years.

I am applying for grants, though my first application was just declined because the website isn't yet up and running. And so I think the main way I'll be able to do this is through donations. Anyone can help by making a contribution, which you can do directly on our website, <http://www.numenfilm.com/blog/sustainable-herbs/>. If you are interested in making a tax-deductible donation, contact me directly as I'm working on finding a fiscal sponsor for this purpose.

It is important to me that all of the information on the website is free. I would rather not pay for it with ads and so the more I can raise through donations, the better.

Other ways to help include inviting me to speak, which I'll begin to do once the site is up and running. Suggest foundations or individuals with the resources and interest in supporting a project like this. Help spread the word. Write about it. Link to the site. My goal is to bring the same attention to the herb industry that the food movement has brought to the food industry – and so in 5-10 years my hope is that a stand-alone project like this is less necessary because it has succeeded in transforming the herb industry as a whole. Anything you can do to help support that would be fabulous! ■