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**Plants and Knowledge, Power and Wealth:
The Political Economy of Ethnobotany and Traditional Medicines**

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Abstract

Ethnobotanical research and intellectual property rights related to the cultural knowledge and medicinal plant resources of Indigenous communities continue to stimulate tremendous debate. Critical reflection on this debate at a systems level is an opportunity to understand the role of ethnomedicinal research in reproducing power relationships (wittingly or unwittingly) within the broader economic and political structures that it operates. From a political economy perspective, ethnobotanical research on traditional medicines can be seen as an early step in the linear conversion of situated cultural and biological "capital" (i.e., cultural knowledge and biological resources) into more removed forms of societal wealth (i.e., medicines, money) through non-local or centralised institutions of power. We locate ethnomedicinal research as a scientific endeavour within this context, and consider the extent to which the research (including researchers, research institutions, and funding agencies) is aligned with particular political and economic imperatives. Such a perspective identifies inherent contradictions within institutions that facilitate erosion of the very capital upon which the scientific endeavour depends. Our analysis suggests new directions. For researchers and their institutions, these include a re-envisioning of roles to embody the protection of place, community, local knowledge and health—which we collectively refer to as "Territory"—as a critically important source of wealth in and of itself. We discuss a need to re-orient our research approach and use of Indigenous cultural knowledge and traditional resources in ways that support circular (self-sustaining) rather than linear (consumptive) processes. This requires, we suggest, a re-allocation of decision-making power to represent different knowledge systems, which then can inform understanding and new directions for collaborative research. By examining the role of ethnobotany and traditional medicines in wealth creation, we see an important opportunity to reconsider "wealth" in terms that give due attention to individual and community health, and function within the limits of natural systems.