

Catalogue of Plants and Animals

FLORA Y FAUNA MEXICANA Mitología y tradiciones



CARMEN AGUILERA

Carmen Anguilera's book, **Mexican Flora and Fauna (Flora y Fauna Mexicana)**, has just been published in a high quality edition by Mexico's Everest Press as part of its series, Mexican Roots. It is part of the publisher's project to contribute to a greater understanding of the wealth of things and beings in Mexico.

The book is the result of Aguilera's detailed and careful research at the National Institute of Anthropology and History on the flora and fauna that have fulfilled people's material, as well as spiritual, needs throughout Mexico's history. Plants and animals used during the prehispanic period, and some still in use today, are identified with their Mayan and Nahuatl names*, as

well as by their scientific names and their names in Spanish.

While the presentation is not at all schematic, as taxonomic description tends to be, it does maintain the rigor of the discipline. Material is presented according to a given plant or animal's importance in Mexican life. An alphabetical index at the end of the book helps the reader to find references with ease. In addition, the book also has a bibliography, a lovely and well-printed set of illustrations and a glossary of Indian names.

Even though people still need nature today much more than we might like to admit, we continue to be one of its major predators. Thus, some native animals and plants have disappeared or are on the brink of extinction. In the case of other plants, however, their medicinal properties are still recognized, and they are used today just as they were long ago. This kind of knowledge from the past serves as a lesson for contemporary society which, whether from ignorance or a desire for immediate gain, is responsible for widespread ecological destruction, disregarding the countless benefits that both flora and fauna have provided people throughout the centuries.

Mexico is one of the world's most important countries in this regard. Someone once claimed that Mexico's shape reminded them of a "horn of plenty," in a clear allusion to the country's incredible natural wealth. The diversity of ecological conditions allowed for the development of an abundant and varied flora and fauna, which together with the country's mineral resources, provided the ingenious peo-

ples with all they needed to assure their well-being. The enormous importance of plants and animals in sustaining human life and the fact that they were considered to be gods (the latter being a result of the former) meant that plants, as well as animals, were respected and nurtured.

Despite the great importance of the flora and fauna in Ancient Mexico, as well as in the country today, relatively little research has been done on the subject. Aguilera's book addresses this problem and achieves its aim by bringing together a sampling of the available information on Mexico's plants and animals. It will both spark interest among neophytes on the topic, as well as become a valuable document for scientists and specialists. The latter will almost certainly find new or little-known information in the text, since in preparing the volume, the author consulted major sources on the Mayan and Nahuatl cultures, several ancient texts, modern ethnographic data and other



Hernández II-219

"Cempoalxóchitl", a typical flower

odds and ends

research in progress.

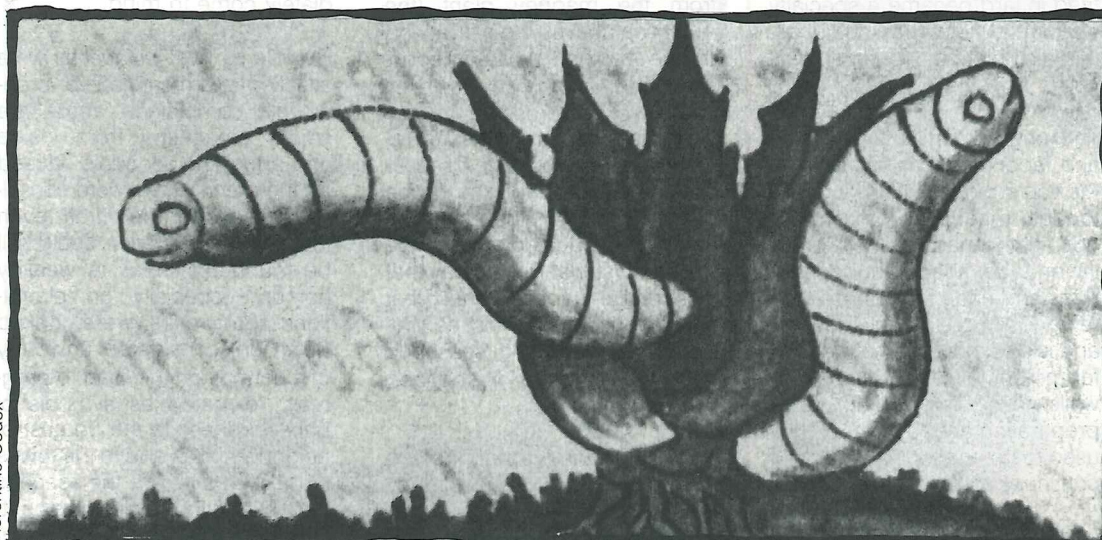
Almost one hundred animals, from the eagle to owls, to the jaguar, manati, alligator, puma and many more, as well as some sixty plants are dealt with in the book. Many of the species were carried to Europe by the Spanish conquerors and their descendants. They are still to be found there today, as familiar to Europeans as the species brought to the Americas during the colonial period are to Latin Americans. This exchange of natural products demonstrates their importance for society and culture.

Despite the fact that one of the book's specific objectives was to be accessible even to non-specialists, the book's rather dry treatment of the data, which could have lent itself to some very interesting reflections, means that it will remain a manual an extremely well-done and careful catalog. Yet even as such, it is enormously useful. It is based on one of the most methodical investigations carried out to



Laud Codex

Hummingbird



Florentine Codex

Magway worms

date on the subject. The illustrations are taken from several different codices, some prehispanic and others colonial, including the Badian Codex, with considerable European influence, and the works of Dr. Francisco Hernández, which are completely westernized. Together, these factors make the book a valuable resource, important to real and to keep close at hand★

Pantxika Cazaux

* The two most important and widely-used languages of the two largest and most-enduring prehispanic Mesoamerican cultures.