

The Business of Botanicals: Exploring the Healing Promise of Plant Medicine in a Global Industry

Ann Armbrecht

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Ann Armbrecht's *The Business of Botanicals* is an insightful, impassioned study of the herbal supplements industry and the challenges of producing its goods in a socially responsible way.

The botanical supplement industry exceeded \$9 billion in sales in 2019. Armbrecht notes that its global supply network has become so complex and disconnected, though, that few consumers understand where the supplements they buy are sourced: where the herbs were grown, how they were harvested and processed, and what the impacts of such practices are on harvesters, communities, and the environment.

Representing hundreds of interviews with people at all levels of the supply chain—a huge herbal supplement factory in New Jersey; an organic echinacea farm in the Pacific Northwest; an elderly Polish woman who harvests wild nettles for \$6 a day—the book is a commanding plea that people engage in “conscious capitalism.” It includes reminders that the cheapest products typically come at a cost for the environment, workers, and the consumer, for whom healing properties are compromised.

Although it acknowledges concerns over product contamination and careless practices, the book also emphasizes how many people strive to do what's right. In northwest India, a company promotes the sustainable production of senna, a natural laxative, by helping local farmers enhance their yield and income while improving local water supplies and supporting education. An effort to protect sacred groves of old growth trees in Western Ghat ensures a sustainable source for the bibhitaki fruit used in ayurvedic medicine, and also protects a critical habitat for the great pied hornbill, a threatened species.

Thoughtful and compelling, *The Business of Botanicals* is insightful in outlining the complexities of sourcing herbal botanicals. It challenges those interested in natural health to take responsibility for understanding the impact of their purchases.

KRISTEN RABE (January / February 2021)

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