Problems and Solutions in Documenting
Local Plant Names in the Philippines

Domingo A. Madulid
National Museum, Philippines

The Philippines is a mine of information on local plant names (represented by more than 8,000 species of flowering plants and 7,000 species of lower plants and fungi) as spoken in more than 100 ethnolinguistic groups in the country. Local plant names have many uses and applications such as in scientific studies (e.g. plant taxonomy, ethnobotany, phytogeography, anthropology, biology, pharmacology, etc.) and in the fields of linguistics, education, culture and historical studies (Madulid 1991).

Other applications of vernacular names are the following: (1) Use in floristic and ecological studies, and identification of plants (Merrill 1923–26); (2) Use in etymological studies of plants (Bartlett 1939; van Steenis 1950); (3) Use in tracing origin of cultivated crops such as corn (Berket-Smith 1943), coconut (Merrill 1936), pandans (Stone 1963), and other crops (Quisumbing 1965; Heiser 1969; Haskell 1963); (4) Use in explaining cultural links between peoples during early civilization (Merrill 1946); (5) Use in understanding the relationship of native peoples and their natural environment (e.g. Fox 1953; Jocano 1973; Conklin 1954; Quisumbing 1951); (5) Use in tracing origin and history of place names (Roces 1976; Chamberlain 1959; Gruezo 1999); (6) Use in tracing migration route of people and prehistoric influences of foreign cultures in a country (Chowning 1963); (7) Use in documenting disappearing languages (Handricourt 1963; Camel 1701); (8) Use in understanding or reconstructing the system of plant classification of indigenous people (Williams 1990); and many other uses (Martin 1995; Schopf 1976; Strother 1977).

Given the many uses of vernacular plant names they should be given due recognition as an important information resource (Madulid 1991). Lexicographers, ethnobotanists and other researchers involved or interested in recording local plant names and their scientific equivalents can get information from many sources:

1. Botanists, agriculturists, horticulturists, foresters, and other plant scientists.
2. Plant hobbyists, nursery men, and garden shop owners.
3. Local farmers, villagers, forest products gatherers, herbolarios, etc.
4. Indigenous people — Many of these people, especially the forest dwellers or those who gather forest products often have extensive knowledge of the plants around them and are therefore rich source of data for local plant names.
5. Publications, reports, thesis, manuscripts, etc. — Books and scientific articles dealing with taxonomy, floristics, ethnobotany, ethnopharmacology, and related fields in the Philippines contain many local names and scientific names of plants. Thesis and research reports are also rich source of plant names.

7. Herbarium specimens — Labels from herbarium specimens usually contain information about the plants including its scientific names, local names and the dialects where the names originate.

8. Questionnaires, survey sheets, etc. — Researchers may distribute questionnaires or survey sheets to resource persons to record local plant names of a particular locality. Students and researchers in ethnobotany, ethnopharmacology, pharmacy, etc. usually do this kind of inquiry.

9. Computerized database through the internet — Local plant names are now compiled in electronic databases and made available to interested users around the world through the internet. Examples of these databases are NAPRALERT (for medicinal plants around the world), Southeast Asia Botanical Collections Information Network (for plants in the Malesian region), and ASEAN Regional Centre for Biodiversity Conservation (for some plants in Southeast Asia). The Philippine National Herbarium, through its website (http://www.pnh.com.ph), will soon make available in the internet the local names of Philippine plants.

Whether the local plant names are derived from primary or secondary sources of information, it is important for researchers to exercise caution to minimize committing errors in the recording, transcription and documentation processes (Steiner 1975). Among the common sources of error are the following:

1. Lack of taxonomic knowledge of plants — Persons recording local plant names are usually not taxonomists and identification of the plants can become a problem. A good practice is to prepare voucher specimens of the plants whose local names are being recorded so these can be identified or verified by taxonomists.

2. Unfamiliarity with the dialects and languages of the locality — In some cases the persons recording local plant names are not native to the locality. Because of unfamiliarity with the language, the recorder can make mistakes especially in the spelling of the local plant names. This was particularly true during the early colonial period in the Philippines when several Spanish and American botanists and lexicographers tried to record the economic plants of the archipelago. Fr. Manuel Blanco’s (1837) *Flora de Filipinas*, and Merrill’s *A Dictionary of the Native Plant Names of the Philippine Island* (1903) and *An Enumeration of Philippine Flowering Plants* (1923–26) contained several misspelled plant names and some words that are not actually plant names mainly due to the recorders’ unfamiliarity to the local languages.

3. Unreliability of resource persons — In some cases, informants from the locality, when asked about local plant names, tend to invent or coin local names for plants that are not familiar to them in order to create a good impression or to avoid reprimand. Invented names or coined names may not be easy to detect and can be recorded in publications. Local informants should, therefore, be asked to be honest and admit if they do not know the names of the plants.

4. Failure in verifying authenticity of plant names — In some cases, different informants give different names for the same species of plant and
recorders of plant names should be able to detect this early and apply remedial measures. A good practice in ethnobotanical survey is to ask two or more informants and compare and analyze the names they provide. Varying names for a particular plant species should be regarded as unreliable and subject to verification.

5. Unfamiliarity with phonetic symbols of plant names recorded in reports, herbarium labels, etc. — Herbarium labels of some local plant names are written with phonetic symbols. This is the practice of some linguists and anthropologists who are particularly interested in the way words are spoken by the local people. Many of Harold Conklin’s herbarium labels from Mindoro (Conklin 1954) and Robert Fox’s plants from Zambales (Fox 1953) for example, are written with phonetic symbols. These names can be wrongly transcribed by recorders who are not familiar with phonetic symbols.

To avoid erroneous recording of plant names, the following are recommended:

1. Familiarize yourself with the plants being studied by referring to publications, herbarium specimens, guidebooks, etc. (Martin 1995)

2. Familiarize yourself with the language of the place where the plant names are being recorded. A researcher will be able to get more reliable data if he is knowledgeable with the language that the people speak in the area (Barbosa 1995).

3. Get reliable resource persons. As much as possible one should get honest and reliable resource persons or informants in the locality. Ask the head or officials of the village, barangay or municipality to help recommend people who could be relied upon as informants for local plant names. To verify the authenticity of local plant names, it is recommended that several persons from the locality are interviewed.

4. Knowledge of phonetic symbols — Plant names taken from labels of herbarium specimens must be transcribed with caution as they may be written with phonetic symbols which are not easily understood by the laymen. These phonetic symbols serve the purposes of linguists but these should be modified to conform to the standard spellings of common names.

5. Consult lexicons or dictionaries of local plant names. Several references provide comprehensive data on local plant names (see above discussion) and these should be consulted by researchers for accuracy and verification of both local and scientific names of plants.

6. Compile local names in computerized database. It is now a common practice of lexicographers and dictionary makers to record plant names in computerized databases. This method of data entry provides easy checking of errors in spelling of botanical and local plant names and provides a more systematic organization of data.

It is clear from the above that local plant names provide many uses and is a rich information resource. Nevertheless, one should be very careful in recording these names as there could be many sources of errors. My experience in compiling *A Dictionary of Philippine Plant Names* for more than twenty five years has made me realize the need for a keen eye for spotting erroneous plant names derived from primary and secondary sources and the ability to detect authentic versus invented local plant names provided by informants from various places in the country.
References


