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# Wild Ones<sup>SM</sup>



## Journal

### ILTIS ON NATURE

*Dr. Hugh Iltis is professor emeritus at University of Wisconsin-Madison. For decades he has crusaded to protect our natural history. He discovered the wild ancestor of modern corn. In the 1960s, Dr. Iltis theorized that humans are genetically pre-disposed to need and enjoy Nature. That theory has been built upon by others and now goes by the moniker 'biophilia.' This text is a reprint of speech Dr. Iltis gave 30 years ago. His message rings as true today as it did then.*

Technology has promised us a post-evolutionary heaven in which wild Nature has a very minor role. Molecular biology, too, has gleeful visions of genetic manipulations of DNA which would change the face of all creation and recast man into a 'perfect' image. Others dream about a cheerful, if dull, world with unlimited opportunity for 40 billion people.

But any one of us, if not blind, who has hunted for prairie flowers in Illinois, or gone exploring in the Peruvian Andes or on the Mexican Plateau, or tried to find a tree growing in Brooklyn, knows that life's diversity is

threatened with imminent destruction, that it will be all but over in a matter of decades for this exuberant biotic wealth. The crisis for all the living is here and now. The world of the future promises to be flowerless, animal-less, and lifeless, except for masses of people. In the next century, in nightmare worlds of steel and concrete, of algae steaks and yeast pies, the day may well come when our great-grandchildren will hold hands in a circle and sing: "Spring has sprung, The Grass has ris, I wonder where the flower is"—and wish they could see one.

Is there any one among us who would like to live in such a world? →

“Today I think that maintaining a lawn is one of the most evil practices of the upper and middle classes. It continues with government support in spite of being flagrantly wasteful of drinking water and non-renewable resources, irresponsibly destructive of our native plant and animal species, cognizant of the defiant and dishonest use of chemicals which are far more threat-

ening to human health than any weed pollen, ignorant and disrespectful of air and water pollution, and finally, because officials are paralyzed by the thought of any economic impact, they condone the inexplicable rudeness of noise pollution.”

*Terrie Otto*

## ILTIS ON NATURE

(continued from previous page)

Indeed, we all love flowers and birds, and seemingly must, through some inner unexplained urge, go exploring for plants and find wild Nature, even if it is in a botanical garden. But is it enough to say that “we need”—that “we love”? The skeptics want to know “why?” and the despoilers of Nature, the technicians of exploitation or the technicians of use, are not impressed by sentiment, but by dollars and profit, board feet and yield per acre. How can we defend sanctuaries for prairie flowers and songbirds and mountain lions and pitcher plants? How can we defend such luxury when our world is plagued with hunger? Can we defend it for reasons other than economic or scientific use? For reasons other than commercial return? Can we defend, in short, a truly human environment for purely selfish human reasons?

Might we not say the best human environment is one in which the human animal can have maximum contact with the natural environment in which it evolved and for which it is genetically programmed without sacrificing the many advantages of civilization; that is, **the optimum modern human environment must represent a compromise between our genetic heritage, which we cannot deny, and the fruits of civilization, which we are loath to give up.**

Physically, as any evolved animal of the tropics, we are fundamentally adapted to wild tropical or subtropical nature, but culturally, especially away

from the equatorial regions, we are dependent on and culturally adapted to towns and cities. Thus, even though we live in houses for our physical well-being, nature must be thought of as an indispensable biological need in our daily life. Every basic adaptation of the human body—be it the ear, the eye, the brain, yes, even of our psyche—demands for proper functioning an environment at least similar to the one in which these structures evolved through natural selection over the past 100 million or so years. For millions of generations, as George Gaylord Simpson points out, any of our monkey ancestors with faulty vision who missed the branches they jumped for fell to the ground, and failed to become our ancestors. Only those that were adapted to Nature contributed to our gene pool.

We who are Darwin’s grandchildren, can thus easily appreciate that like the need for love, the need for nature, the need for its diversity and beauty, has a genetic basis. **We cannot exclude Nature from our lives because we cannot change our genes.** That must be why we civilized and clothed apes continually bring nature and its diversity and its beauty into our civilized lives, yet without really understanding why we do. We have flowerpots and pedigreed pets, members of the “Plasticales” in every bank, and even green beech leaves imprinted on the side of airplane ‘puke bags’ to make us feel better, we do all this to cater to our genetically based appreciation of natural beauty.

In contrast, spend a week in the heart of downtown metropolis, with all its noise, stench, and congestion. No ‘natural’ selection equipped us humans for such insults. In the past 20,000 years we have probably degenerated: in comparison to our ancestors we have poorer powers of sight and smell, less sensitive ears, and much less hair. Some day, if we are not careful, through city-selected degeneration, the 40 billion of half-

blind Homo post-sapiens will lead a life resembling that of termites. Then, if quality natural environments still survive someplace by accident, we may well not be able to appreciate any of them. This is not what we should want!

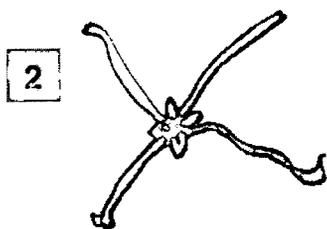
**Separated from Nature, the human animal as a biological unit is, in most ways, a meaningless bundle of adaptations.** Similarly, Man as a cultural force cannot be understood without his landscape. Today, as never before, there is an overriding urgency to awake in time to prevent the permanent subjugation and extinction of the living landscape, whether wild and free or farmed in a non-intensive way. Senator Ingalls of Kansas said some 80 years ago, “Give the philosopher a handful of soil, the mean annual temperature and rainfall, and his analysis would enable him to predict with absolute certainty the characteristics of the nation.”

We, today, are ignoring this basic truth. We, in this overly rich country, now worship the high standard of living, but forget that ultimately it flows from the land. We credit scientific advances, the pioneer spirit, and the democratic institutions with our great agricultural wealth in the Middle West, but often neglect to mention that due to an accident of Nature we have some of the richest farm soils in the world.

Without the prairie or the forest, we the American people cannot understand where we came from, what we are, or where we are going. Yet today the prairies and the forests have been largely killed, and thousands of species, especially of the prairie flora, are on the verge of extinction. By our avarice, we are losing touch not only with our biology, but with our history and with our culture. **Meanwhile, our technological cheerleaders urge us on to more intense utilization and greater destruction.**

Does all this really matter? Surely, our technology may keep us rich and

WITCH HAZEL FLOWER DETAIL



Lucy Schumann decorates our page numbers this issue with Autumn Witch Hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*.

abundant; but will it keep us human? Will it satisfy the simple and vast unspoken needs of humanity, the need to keep in touch with its ancestry? The need to live a biologically and culturally meaningful life?

The original landscape before the settlers came is still vitally important to our education process. We need fenceless wild lands to know how our forefathers lived and worked. To understand our very existence, we need wilderness to know where we, the human species, came from. **Yet we are rapidly becoming cultural and evolutionary orphans—a people without a past, a species out of context.**

Whether we are concerned with such basic biological or cultural considerations, or show concern for preservation because of some immediate or long-range economic or ethical concerns, the fundamental relationship of man to Nature must be clearly understood. **It should never be forgotten that this is the only living world, the only flora and fauna that you and I and our children shall ever have.** It should never be forgotten that we are given now our last chance to preserve even bits and pieces of our biotic environment, the last chance to save our flowers, and birds and fish.

We, who understand that the basis of human culture lies in the past, we, who believe that man does not live by bread alone, must back our conservation ideals with concrete action. That our prairies and our forests, our deserts and our waters shall yet survive and thrive is our responsibility. That these wildlands shall live and bloom for 10,000 years to come is our contribution to human culture and our legacy to our children, so that they, on a warm spring day, can feel peace in a sea of grass, watch a bee visit a shooting star, hear a sandpiper call in the sky, and begin to understand the symphony of life. ☪

—Hugh Iltis

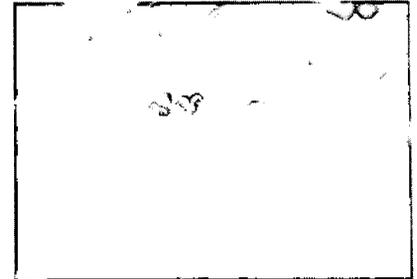


*This column focuses on a plant species that is valued by birds found in the upper Midwest. Each submission presents a plant that is in its prime during the time you are likely to be enjoying this publication.*

## RED-OSIER DOGWOOD

(*Cornus sericea*, aka  
*Cornus stolonifera*)

**F**all means birds are on the move. Some species are making short-distance trips in preparation for our uncertain winter. Others are preparing for remarkable journeys to as far away as South America. Dogwoods are beautiful plants, particularly to the birds that, depending upon the season, will find the shrub useful for nectar, insects, fruit and cover. For us, Red-osier Dogwood (aka Red Twig Dogwood) offers stunning red stems that can brighten the dreariest of winter days. Dogwoods are hardy plants that require little care.



**Characteristics:** Red-osier Dogwood is a vigorous grower and will form substantial shrubby hedges spreading by suckers. These shrubs will grow to approximately 8 feet in height and 6 feet in width. With the help of birds, spreading partially digested seeds, these shrubs may spread even further. Red-osier Dogwoods are easy to transplant, so you can easily overrule inappropriate plantings by birds. In every season, these snappy shrubs dress up the landscape. From their snow-white blossoms in spring and deep green foliage in summer, to the rich red stems in winter, these plants provide color in the landscape. One of the telltale signs of spring after our painfully long winters can be found in the swelling and brightening of the dogwood stems.

**This plant needs:** Any sun conditions are acceptable. Dogwoods perform best in moist conditions, and can tolerate standing water for extended periods. These hardy plants can also easily handle Midwestern temperatures down to zone 3 conditions. This plant can withstand substantial pruning, and young wood has the brightest bark. Dead wood should be removed in spring before flowering.

**Who benefits:** To birds, dogwood berries are like ice cream on a summer day. For birds like Wood Thrushes, Catbirds, and Orioles, who have many miles to travel to their winter homes, dogwood berries are highly sought after energy boosters. The size of dogwood berries make them an easy meal for birds large and small. The dense foliage of this shrub provides good nesting cover in spring and summer. Robins, Catbirds, Cardinals, and even some warbler species have raised countless families behind the branches of dogwoods. ☪ —Steve Mahler

*This column is written by Steve Mahler, owner of The Wild Bird Center, Menomonee Falls. Steve welcomes your comments and suggestions at 414-255-9955.*

