

Conservation Spotlight:

The nature and goals of the Illinois Native Plant Society

Story By Bohdan Dziadyk

For thousands of years after the retreat of the last glaciers, the land known today as Illinois included tall grass prairies and hardwood forests, all inhabited by native plants. Today, less than 1 percent of the pre-settlement prairie remains unbroken in the Prairie State, and the original diversity of native plants has been reduced in many places to crop monocultures.

The number of alien species—often aggressive weeds—represented in the Midwestern flora may now be 25 percent. Why is this significant? Why should the diversity of native plants concern anyone?

As primary producers, plants represent the fundamental component of Illinois ecosystems. Unlike recent introductions, native species are usually better adapted to prevailing conditions than plants originating in different environments. Native plants have evolved

defenses against familiar enemies, yet often can't compete with a new plant (or insect, or fungal pathogen) introduced from the other side of the world. We don't always recognize the environmental significance of an individual plant species, any more than we understand the intricate relationships among the full range of living things within our ecosystems.

But understanding every piece of nature's puzzle shouldn't be a prerequisite for saving its parts. In his landmark book "A Sand County Almanac," famed conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote, "If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not.

"If the biota, in the course of eons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts?"

Native species get plenty of press, yet public attention usually remains captivated by high-profile fauna. According to the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board, 144 animal and 339 plant species are listed as endangered or threatened

in Illinois. While far fewer in number, the listed animals enjoy prominent advocacy groups defending their survival and well-being. Plants, lacking the charm of animals, must compete for representation in the public mind.

But native plants are starting to get the attention they deserve, and today their protection is taken seriously by numerous state and private organizations promoting the protection and welfare of listed plants. Among them: the Illinois Native Plant Society (www.ill-inps.org). Founded in Carbondale in 1981 as the Southern Illinois Native Plant Society, and becoming a statewide organization in 1986, INPS is committed to "the preservation, understanding and appreciation of the native flora and natural communities of Illinois."



Bohdan Dziadyk is president of the Illinois Native Plant Society and professor of biology at Augustana College in Rock Island.

(Photo by Bill Kleiman.)

Annual Meeting at Nachusa Grasslands

The Illinois Native Plant Society is joining forces with The Nature Conservancy's Illinois Chapter (www.nature.org/illinois) and conducting a joint annual meeting at the 2,500-acre Nachusa Grasslands near Franklin Grove in Lee County. TNC is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2007. The three-day event, May 18-20, 2007, will feature field trips, keynote speakers, a silent auction and a banquet.



(Photo by Ren Moore.)

The Illinois Native Plant Society currently has six chapters: Central (Springfield), Forest Glen (Westfield), Northeast (Chicago), Southern (Carbondale), Irene Cull (Peoria) and Quad City (Rock Island). Its quarterly newsletter, "The Harbinger," provides information on state and chapter-level events as well as those of like-minded organizations, and its technical journal "Erigenia" (named for the Harbinger of spring, *Erigenia bulbosa*) carries referred articles of original research. Annual meetings are held in May at locations throughout the state.