
Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison On the Death of Professor Emeritus Hugh Hellmut Iltis

Hugh Hellmut Iltis passed away peacefully at his home within the UW Arboretum on December 19, 2016 at the age of 91. Widely regarded as one of the most influential botanists of his generation, he continued to study plants and fight for environmental conservation to the end of his rich life. He joined the Botany faculty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1955 as a plant taxonomist and curator of the UW-Madison (WIS) Herbarium. He served as a professor and Director of the Herbarium until retiring in 1993.

Hugh Iltis was born April 7, 1925 in Brno, Czechoslovakia. His father, a biologist and biographer of Gregor Mendel, was targeted by the Nazis as an outspoken Jewish intellectual. He and then his family fled through Europe and eventually gained entrance to the United States with the help of Albert Einstein settling in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Hugh trained at the University of Tennessee and Washington University in St. Louis where he earned his PhD in 1952. During World War II, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and served in Europe until 1946 first as a medic and then in Army Intelligence, interrogating captured German officers for the Nuremberg trials. He was married three times, and is survived by four sons: Frank, Michael, David, and John.

Iltis worked tirelessly to build the already respected University of Wisconsin Herbarium into the exceptional institution it is today. He and his students crisscrossed the state to collect thousands of specimens, documenting distributions of plant species across the Upper Midwest. He also led and oversaw innumerable expeditions to Mexico and Central and South America. On the altiplano of southern Peru he discovered two undescribed species of wild tomato, one of which provided genetic material to greatly improve commercial varieties. Iltis was also the world authority on the caper (*Capparaceae*) and spider-flower (*Cleomaceae*) families. However, he is best known for his role in helping to discover perennial teosinte, a wild diploid relative of modern maize, and elucidating the morphological changes that transformed such an unpromising wild grass into one of the most important crops in the world. He often finished lectures by admonishing his students to “be a good ancestor” and to leave the world a better place than they found it. When asked in a public lecture “what good is nature,” he retorted “what good are you?”

Hugh’s courses in plant geography, taxonomy, grass systematics, and lectures on ‘Man’s Need for Nature’ were wildly popular. He trained 37 graduate students. He established particularly strong relationships with botanists from Mexico and Latin America bringing many to study at UW–Madison (often providing free board and lodgings for weeks to months at his home). His work with colleagues at the University of Guadalajara led to the creation of the 345,000-acre Sierra de Manantlán Biosphere Reserve in Jalisco, Mexico. He also co-founded the Wisconsin Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, working to preserve iconic natural areas in southern Wisconsin and helped to establish Hawaii’s Natural Areas Law. He also helped lead the fight to outlaw the use of DDT in Wisconsin, the first state to ban this pesticide. He and his late wife, Sharyn Wisniewski, left a gift to the UW-Madison Department of Botany to support graduate student fieldwork in the area of plant systematics.

On Earth Day, 2017 Dr. Iltis was inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame -- one of many honors bestowed upon him in recognition of his illustrious career. Iltis received the Sol Feinstone Environmental Award (1990), National Wildlife Federation of Merit Award (1992), and Society for Conservation Biology Service Award (1994). Fellow botanists honored Hugh Iltis by naming one genus and 19 species of plants after him. Other accolades include the Asa Gray Award (American Society of Plant Taxonomists) in 1994, a special Merit Award (American Society of Botany) in 1996, the Luce Maria Villareal de Puga Medal from the University of Guadalajara in 1994, and an honorary degree from there in 2007. Hugh Iltis practiced what he preached and will not be forgotten.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE

Kenneth Cameron, Theodore Cochrane, Kenneth Sytsma, and Donald Waller