

The Ethics of Plant Rescue

By Moralea Milne

The Victoria Native Plant Study Group (NPSG) has been in the forefront of the plant rescue movement. By negotiating with developers we save native plants – including some quite rare ones – from certain eradication under the blades and tracks of land clearing machinery. Sometimes these rescued plants are donated to restoration projects. At other times the seeds and cuttings are used to propagate plants in nurseries and further the native plant gardening movement. These all seem to be activities that we can and should support. But I began to wonder.

In the spring 2002 and 2003, there was a huge plant rescue operation at a residential development sites in Langford, BC. I was an eager participant. I was delighted to be able to save native plants from certain obliteration and provide local municipal grounds with often expensive and hard to find native plants. All we rescuers carefully followed the rules laid out by the developers and stayed well out of covenanted areas, glad to know that some of the site's natural beauty and plant community was protected. I did give a moment's pause to wonder where the many birds would be nesting that year. However there was a beautiful, intact site across the road they could migrate to. I ignored the obvious: that site would already have its full complement of birds.

In early 2003, I heard that another site, which backed onto Mill Hill Regional Park, was also about to be developed. Another rescue began.

This site was amazing, with an incredible diversity of native species, including some threatened and endangered rarities. There were literally thousands of *Allium amplexans* (slimleaf onion) and many mosses, lichens and fungi.

All these species begs the question – what did we miss? What other rare jewels were not apparent to our non-expert eyes? Esteemed botanist Hans Roemer had recently found many more species and occurrences of rare plants on Mill Hill than was previously thought to exist. It is logical to consider the same would be true at the adjacent site slated for development.

Last year brought a shift in my perceptions and I didn't feel quite so lucky to be involved in the

"good works" of plant rescue. Rather, I felt increasingly sickened by the destruction and plunder of this hugely productive, rich, rare association of ecosystems. Why are we so focused on plant rescue? If you were to try snake rescue or alligator lizard rescue or caterpillar rescue, you would soon realize the futility of "rescues".

When someone declared they felt like "a kid in a candy store", I really started to wonder what we were doing. This was no candy store that could be restocked with old favourites. It took many thousands of years to produce the plants and animals at this site. Nothing we attempt in our lifetimes could ever replace the astonishing environment that was lost.

When I consider the number of people who made many repeated trips to this site to rescue plants, I wonder what could have been accomplished had that same time and energy been directed towards saving the site? I have heard the developers were willing to sell the site to Capital Regional District Parks. What if we had worked with the District of Langford, CRD Parks, the Garry Oak Ecosystem Recovery Team, other non-governmental organizations, the provincial and the federal governments? Could we have preserved this immensely rich and biodiverse community for future generations? Through our ignorance and inactivity, we let a piece of the best of the last remnants be destroyed. Perhaps if we had not been so focused on "rescuing" individual plants we could have rescued an entire ecosystem. What good are the plants that we saved really? They have become mere gardening material rather than part of a dynamic ecosystem. Is that a worthwhile trade?

Should we focus our limited resources on plant rescue? Or could the enthusiastic members of the plant rescue corps harness the power of their combined energies to the preservation of endangered ecosystems?

Perhaps if I could be sure we had explored all possible avenues to protect and preserve every remaining significant Garry oak and associated ecosystem site, then "plant rescue" operations would be worthwhile endeavours. At the moment I find myself sitting on the fence of indecision, staring at the crossroads of choice and I ask myself this question: If there is only a limited time left, what would I want to leave as my legacy?

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