

Going the way of the Dodo Bird      Beth Turlington

Most of us know about extinct and endangered animals, but the same holds true for plants as well.

We lose plants for a variety of reasons, including disease, over harvesting, habitat loss, agricultural practices and insects.

Chestnut Blight is caused by a fungus that entered the United States around 1900 on imported Asian nursery stock. American chestnut trees had no defense against this fungus and in less than 50 years four billion trees had died. Trees that were up to 100 feet tall and hundreds of years old were gone in the blink of an eye. Chestnut Blight is spread by insects, the wind, rain, and other animals. You'll still find American Chestnuts, but most will be root sprouts of trees that died from the blight and eventually the sprouts will too. Scientists have been working almost from the start of this plague to find a way to save these trees and are making great headway, by crossing our American variety with blight resistant Chinese Chestnuts.

Dutch Elm Disease (DED) was introduced here in 1930 in a load of lumber imported from Europe. By 1970, 77 million American Elms had been killed. I can still hear my grandmother, who never got angry about much, fussing about that "darn Dutch Elm Disease" taking her beautiful trees. All I remember of those trees were the huge stumps in the yard. DED is a fungal disease that is spread by two types of Elm bark beetles, the European and Native. Again, scientists and researchers are working to save the American elm and have made progress with cloning. Like the American chestnut, the American elm isn't extinct, but it's endangered.

One of the "new kids on the block" is the Emerald Ash Borer, which was found in Michigan in 2002, again brought in on lumber probably from Asia, in wooden shipping containers. The larvae of this insect do all the damage. In the short time it's been here, the Emerald Ash Borer has killed tens of millions of ash trees from Canada to as far south as Tennessee, west to Minnesota, Iowa and Missouri and east to New York. Unfortunately at this point, there isn't any treatment for this, but scientists are working diligently to find a way to stop it.

Think about those numbers. All of those trees, gone, for good, from fungus and bugs. Imported fungus and bugs I might add. This where the USDA and other agencies come in to play to try and stop these types of infestations from getting here in the first place by quarantining or destroying plants from other countries.

In the state of Texas alone, the list of threatened and endangered plants is substantial. A lot of this is due to loss of habitat, as we keep encroaching into their natural range.

Texas Trailing Phlox is one of our most endangered native plants, and is one of the rarest globally endangered phlox. Fortunately for this pretty plant and many other native plants, there is Dr. David Creech of Stephen F. Austin State University and the Pinewoods Native Plant Center (PNPC). Dr. Creech has been working for years to save primarily endangered natives of East Texas. The PNPC became an affiliated garden of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in 2000 and they work with and share information with their botanists and horticulturists. It's through these types of cooperative efforts we see plants on the brink of extinction being brought back and reintroduced in their native habitats.

Most Arboretums and Botanical gardens in the United States have started some type of endangered plant conservations program. While they don't get the big bucks, and spot lights that animal preservation programs do, their work is no less vital. The loss of any plant or animal is loss for all of us. While it may sound hokey, the whole circle of life thing really does exist. Losing a species of trees for example will have an effect on the insects and animals that depend on it for food and shelter, the ecosystem where it grows and right up to humans. Think about all the things we do with lumber and tree products.

Because of the work being done at the PNPC and other facilities all over the county and around the world, my grandchildren and yours, will be able to see American Chestnut and Elms, native Texas wild flowers and plants growing in nature, in their native habitats. They won't have to look at an artist's rendering in a book of extinct plants and animals, like the Dodo bird.