

Endangered! Quillworts of Thigpen Creek

In case you missed the announcement, the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service declared on October 28, 1992, that *Isoetes Louisianensis*, the Louisiana Quillwort, was placed on the Endangered Species List. Scientific studies going back to 1973 established that *Isoetes Louisianensis* lives only in some small streams in Washington and St. Tammany Parishes. One of the main populations of the rare fern-like plant is located in Thigpen Creek, a tributary of the Bogue Chitto River, which in turn is a tributary of the Pearl River.

The Louisiana Quillwort illustrates one of the problems facing endangered species; its name. We can all identify with a better known endangered species of the Delta country, the Louisiana Black Bear. It is furry and warm-blooded and its name makes you think of Teddy Bears, as well as the ursine trio identified with Goldilocks, the young burglar who broke into their home. But "Quillwort" has a gross sound to it that makes you think of scratchy old pens used to sign musty old papers and the things that grow on your hand when you were a kid picking up frogs and toads.

And who named Thigpen Creek? Somebody named Thigpen probably, who was getting revenge on his family for giving him a name that sounds like a place for keeping swine. This poor plant would probably have a better chance of survival, and certainly a

more sympathetic attitude from people, if it had a more mellifluous name. When I called the Fish and Wildlife Service office in New Orleans to inquire, the person answering the phone snickered, chortled, executed a poorly-controlled guffaw, and gave me a number in Washington, D.C., to call. My call to that office went something like this:

"Hello. I'm calling to inquire about the Louisiana Quillwort, which was placed on the endangered species list a few weeks ago."

"Huh? What's that?"

"The Louisiana Quillwort. I think it's some sort of fern."

"Oh! It's a plant." (low snicker)

Eventually I did talk to a very helpful person who directed me to one of the greatest literary collections of Western Civilization, the Federal Register. Eagerly reading the brilliant, flowing prose, I learned that quillworts are heterosporous, producing both megasporangia and microsporangia. Furthermore, megaspore morphology and habitat preference are primary characters for the identification of *Isoetes* species.

I was also thrilled to learn, as I am sure you readers will be, that the distinctive characters on which *Isoetes Louisianensis* was based included born-spotted sporangial walls and megaspores with high reticulate ridges producing a spiny effect. And look out when you're around *Isoetes Louisianensis* because it "has been

reported to sporulate twice a year, producing megaspores in the spring and microspores in the fall."

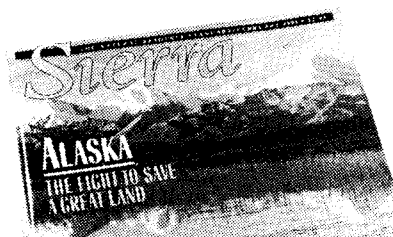
This exquisite scientific information leads one to appreciate the patient botanists who hung out at Thigpen creek, spring and fall, waiting for the quillwort to sporulate, megasporadically or microsporadically.

On the other hand, one wonders about these vegetable, voyeurs, invading the quillworts' privacy, acting as Peeping Toms/Thomasinas, taking notes and pictures as the shy little plants engage in their reproductive rituals. The Federal Register does show that the bureaucrats at the Fish and Wildlife Service are doing their jobs, however.

Several persons opposing the listing of the Louisiana Quillwort, as an endangered species argued that it did not deserve listing because it is "insignificant and has no value." The Service responded that usefulness or significance has no relevance in protection under the Endangered Species Act. That was a good answer: I know lots of people, who are insignificant and have no value, but we still protect them from harm.

Do your part, Delta Sierrans. Put those bumper stickers on your cars and canoes: "I (big red heart) Thigpen Quillworts!" and "Have You Hugged Your Thigpen Quillwort Today?" Δ

— Earl Higgins



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