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A journey with noted University of Wisconsin-Madison botanist Hugh Iltis usually took much longer than normal because he frequently pulled the car over to show passengers a plant he noticed on the side of the road.

Iltis was one of the first scientists to grasp the notion that human psychological health is closely intertwined with nature, what Edward O. Wilson later called biophilia hypothesis. Iltis was giving lectures and writing essays on the need for people to have a deep emotional bond with plants in the 1960s, long before Wilson wrote about it in the 1980s, said Donald Waller, a UW botany professor and longtime colleague of Iltis.

To Iltis' thinking, "if people understood evolution better, they would understand the evolution of the human psyche and the need for nature," Waller said.

Iltis died Dec. 19 after a long illness in Madison. He was 91.

He was a plant geographer who traveled to remote areas in central and South America to collect seeds and plant specimens, an educator who taught popular classes on grasses and plant geography, a mentor who influenced the careers of dozens of graduate students and a conservationist who helped start the Wisconsin chapter of the Nature Conservancy in the 1960s. As director of the Wisconsin Herbarium, he greatly expanded the state's repository of dried plant specimens.

Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1925, Iltis' father, Hugo, was a botanist and biographer of famous geneticist Gregor Mendel. Hugo Iltis was Jewish and a left-wing political activist who published an anti-Nazi pamphlet "The Myth of Blood and Race," which made him a target of the Nazi regime. With the help of Albert Einstein, the family immigrated to the U.S. in 1938.

Emmet Judziewicz, emeritus professor of biology at UW-Stevens Point, met Iltis when he went to UW-Madison in 1981 as a graduate student. Years later Judziewicz was working in the Wisconsin Herbarium on the Madison campus when he used the library's copy machine and noticed a brittle, typewritten letter someone had forgotten. Written in German, mailed from Princeton University in 1936, it appeared to be a fan letter to Hugo Iltis praising his anti-Nazi pamphlet. When Judziewicz looked at the signature he was shocked to see it was signed by Einstein.

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mountainous regions of Mexico, Peru and Ecuador, which plant geneticists later used to create disease-resistant crops.

"He was willing to endure hardships in the field and get to know the local people who grew these crops and befriended them. He helped to start nature preserves in Mexico and he also trained people in botany in Mexico," Judziewicz said.

Frank Iltis went on some of his father's field trips, including a trip where Iltis drove a UW-owned car from Madison to Mexico City and the country's east and west coasts, collecting seeds and live specimens along the way.

"I can remember him kind of jamming on the brakes while driving down the highway at 60 mph when he'd see something at the side of the road. He'd jump out and have everyone take a look," Frank Iltis said.

After moving to the U.S. as a teenager, Iltis studied at the University of Tennessee before enlisting in the U.S. Army during World War II. He was sent to Europe in 1944 working as a medic and, because he spoke German fluently, an interrogator of captured German officers. He stayed in Germany through 1946, working as an intelligence officer and helping prepare documents for the Nuremburg trials.

He earned his bachelor's degree at Tennessee and a Ph.D. at Washington University in St. Louis. After teaching at the University of Arkansas for a few years, Iltis was hired by UW as a botany professor and herbarium director in 1955.

Intense, blunt

Iltis had strong opinions — about the need to protect the environment, the needless destruction of biological diversity and what he contended was an unsustainable human population explosion — and wasn't afraid to share them. He was remembered as an intense, blunt man who made his mission to stir things up.

"Some people found him off-putting. I can understand not everyone would appreciate his blunt, direct style," said Waller, who traveled to Mexico with Iltis on plant gathering expeditions. "But because I admired his values it meant a lot to me to be his friend."

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supported the idea that domestic corn was derived from a group of grasses that grows wild in Mexico. He was instrumental in establishing the 345,000-acre Sierra de Manantlan Biosphere Reserve in Mexico.

While on a plant collecting trip in Peru in 1962, Iltis spotted a wild tomato that had never been classified before. After sending samples and seeds to specialists and herbariums, it turned out that Iltis' discovery was a new tomato species with much more sugar and solids than domestically grown tomatoes, a species later used as a hybrid to greatly boost the flavor and solids content of domestic tomatoes.

Iltis retired from UW in 1993, but he didn't stop looking under his feet at the ground around him. In 2012 he was credited with discovering a tiny violet in Peru he collected decades earlier that he called *viola lilliputana*.

"He was a delightful colleague in many ways. An inspiration to me and his students, especially on matters of conservation. He was a conscience for us. He was always reminding us of the duty and responsibility we had for future generations," Waller said.

Iltis is survived by his sons Frank, Michael, David and John. A celebration of his life will be planned.