



A nature center fights to survive

By ROBERT KIPPER

Doug Covert hasn't received a paycheck in six weeks.

He is serving as director of the Drayton Plains Nature Center during its most severe financial crisis. The inflation pinch, which has caused even the most warm-hearted to be less responsive toward charities, may force the 137-acre nature center to close within the next six months.

Unless donations pick up, much of the center — which includes woods, meadows, fish hatcheries and marshland — will be returned to the state and subject to resale and commercial development.

"I simply believe the nature center is so damn worthwhile. I can't imagine it ceasing to operate," says Covert, as he plunges into a last-ditch fund-raising drive.



The directors of the center are hoping that Oakland County residents will donate \$50,000 to continue its operation.

The Drayton center, located four miles north of Pontiac, is a fenceless, admission-less place that posts no closing hours and few restrictions.

IT OFFERS changing landscape and numerous examples of plant and animal life.

Friendly snakes can be easily found near its narrow pathways. Wild, edible fruit hang from many of the trees. Ducks squawk and swim in streams. Land and nature, as it has existed since most local people can remember, are allowed to remain.

To those who know, visit and even take it for granted, closing would be the first time since the middle 1800's that the land was not known as either a fish hatchery or a nature center.

For the hundreds of school groups that come to the center each year from throughout Southeast Michigan, closing would mean one less place to study nature first hand.

DRAYTON'S PROBLEMS go far beyond not paying its director. The onetime staff of three has been suspended. For the first time, school groups are charged a minimal fee for a guided hike.

Keeping the center open, and helping educate young minds to the importance of preserving nature is essential, says Richard Page, of Birmingham, one of the trustees of the center.

Many adults, those who probably won't be killed by pollution, in their lifetime are apathetic about ecology, Page says.

Children might be different.

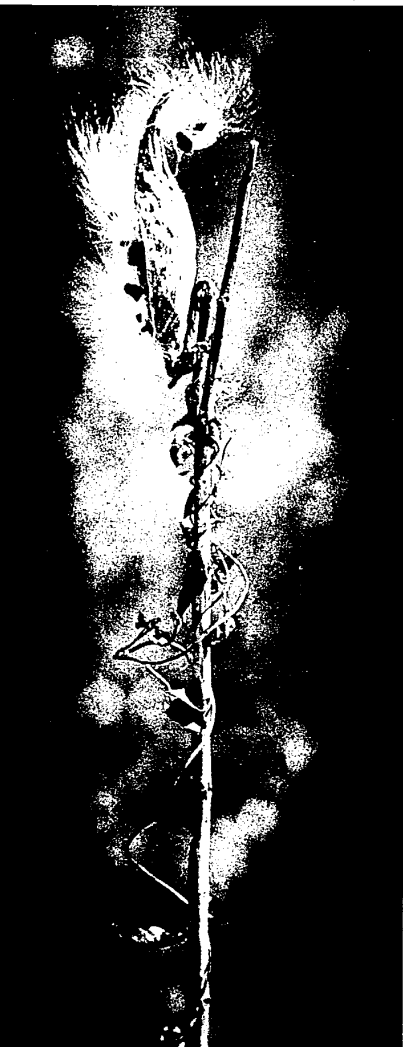
"One of these days people are going to get mad," Page says. "They are going to stop paving our forests and stop smoking our air."

Another trustee, B. Jeffery Cornish of Birmingham, calls the center unique with goals that haven't started to be realized. He admits his prejudice. He once lived nearby and frequently tramped its paths.

Covert finds it difficult to explain the importance of keeping the center open, but his answer is best.

"If you have to ask why the center should be saved," he says, "the answer probably won't mean much."

Photographed by
Barbara McClellan



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