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University of Lethbridge biologist finds a new tool to help save endangered plant species

Dr. Jenny McCune, a University of Lethbridge biology professor, collaborated with an up-and-coming filmmaker to produce a documentary designed to focus greater public attention on endangered plant species and her fight to save them.

[*The Quiet Green Creatures*](#) highlights the work McCune and her students are doing in southern Ontario to boost the sustainability of two endangered plant species, the wood poppy and crooked-stem aster.

The number of plant species at risk in Canada outweighs endangered animals, she says, yet their plight hasn't seemed to catch the public's interest to the same degree.

"They're part of our wildlife, and they're just as worthy of us making sure they're doing OK and understanding why they're so rare," she says. "And if the main reason they're so rare is because of what we're doing — namely, chopping down most of the forest that they used to live in — then we might have to help them if we're going to keep them around."

Neither of the two species being studied is crucial in the development of life-saving medicines and both also grow in the United States. That doesn't mean their extinction from Canada wouldn't be a loss.

"It would reduce the amazing diversity of different life forms that we have in this country," says McCune, adding it's important to appreciate the plants as unique outcomes of evolution which deserve equal rights to exist.

As a graduate student, she attended a workshop on the importance of communicating one's research to the public. With that in mind, McCune decided to shoot some video with a GoPro camera while she and her crew were doing field research last summer. Upon returning to ULethbridge, she approached Professor William Smith in the Department of New Media, who put her in contact with Rodrigo Henriquez (BFA – New Media '20).

With an interest in science and conservation, he was happy to put the skills he had learned in the classroom to the test. Henriquez, who just finished his first year towards a master's,

thoroughly enjoyed editing the raw video and working with McCune on the voice-over to produce a short documentary easily digestible by the public.

“The opportunity to do this type of documentary doesn’t come up very often. And since I am an academic and I do love that type of stuff, being able to use my talents and abilities to help out was just icing on the cake,” says the co-founder of [Starset Media](#), adding he’d welcome more work along those same lines.

The Quiet Green Creatures also provides interested students with a real-life glimpse of research work in the field. McCune says it was an added bonus that the enthusiasm of doctoral students Emma Neigel and Amy Wiedenfeld, and undergraduates Carisa McGale and Kirsty McFadyen shines through in the video.

Student-researchers and project partners in the [Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada](#), the [Nature Conservancy of Canada](#), the [Wilder Institute](#) and the [Kayanase](#) plant nursery are vital to McCune’s work.

McCune and her students are studying the wood poppy and crooked-stem aster in forest land fragmented by a growing number of crop fields and subdivisions. They are trying to determine why the plants are so rare, the habitat they require to survive and thrive, and whether they are candidates for conservation translocation – the practice of introducing plants in new habitats on protected land to safeguard their sustainability.

While conservation translocation has proven successful in Canada with animals, such as the reintroduction of the swift fox population in Alberta and Saskatchewan, the practice doesn’t have the same history here when it comes to plants. McCune’s research could assist in determining its viability.

This news release can be found online at [endangered plants](#).

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