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## **Remembering Alex Wilson**

by David Orsini

On October 26, 1993, the ecological restoration movement lost one of its most articulate spokespersons. On this date Alex Wilson succumbed to a lengthy battle with AIDS-related illnesses. While Alex's name may not be readily familiar to all, his contribution to the environmental movement was very significant.

A self-taught horticulturist, Alex received an MA in Comparative Literature from the University of Massachusetts. In the 1980's Alex established the Garrison Creek Planting Company with artist, Stephen Andrews and horticulturist, Kim Delaney. Naming their company after a buried Toronto creek set them apart from the beginning. Garrison Creek received wide recognition for their ability to incorporate native plants and natural systems in their designs. They were the landscape architects of choice for several architectural firms, though they were not registered landscape architects. They were urban ecologists who brought their expertise into the planning and design realm. They were selected as one of five finalists in the City of Toronto's Cumberland Park design competition in a field of over 200. They were also short-listed for the Toronto Islands Housing Competition. In 1992 they were awarded the landscape design contract for the new headquarters of The Body Shop Canada in Don Mills, Ontario. Their innovative approach to landscape design can be seen in the unique blend of features at the Body Shop such as: a Physic Garden (containing plants used in the company's products), Cutting Garden, Orchard, Hedgerow, and Wetland.

Even during his illness Alex exerted considerable time and energy in organizing the 1992 Society of Ecological Restoration Conference in Waterloo, Ontario, and in making the AIDS Memorial in downtown a reality.

Alex always devoted time for research and travel in support of his writing and restoration work. The breadth of his knowledge came through in both his work and writings. His ability to synthesize ideas on literature, culture, history, politics, design, horticulture and ecology was his unique trademark.

In 1991 his long-awaited book, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape From Disney to the Exxon Valdez*, was published by Between The Lines in Canada and Basil Blackwell in the United States. This book, eight years in the making, was described by Frederic Jameson as "a beautiful book about ugliness." Though Alex employed a critical review of human intervention in the landscape during the latter part of the twentieth century, his hope for the future is succinctly stated in the following passage from the book.

*We must build landscapes that heal, connect, and empower, that make intelligible our relations with each other and with the natural world: places that welcome and enclose, whose breaks and edges are never without meaning. Nature parks cannot do this work. We urgently need people living on the land, caring for it, working out an idea that includes human culture and human livelihood. All of this calls for a new culture of nature, and it cannot come soon enough.*

In their designs, Alex and company attempted to create settings where nature could take hold and prosper. In 1992 Alex prepared a two-part radio program for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation entitled "Restoring the Earth". In 1992 he was a recipient of the Canadian Wildflower Society Conservation Award.

Those of us who knew Alex personally will miss him dearly. Those of us involved in the ecological restoration movement are fortunate to have his legacy to build on.