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Building a marsh from scratch



Working with carex, a type of sea grass, John Houghton and Christine Psyk plant the young shoots in the expanse of saltwater marsh build onto Jetty Island.

Photo: The Herald/DREW PERINE

Sand dunes expert plants his magic

His grasses help create new refuge

By **SCOTT GORMAN**, Herald Writer

JETTY ISLAND—Wilbur TERNYIK sits on a log contemplating the root system of a section of dune grass, like a man gazing tenderly at his child, or a sweetheart.

He stumbles over his words as he attempts to explain to a visitor what is clearly in his heart, that he feels as connected to this plant and its potential as he does to anything in the world.

Finally, he gives up and falls back on the obvious.

“I don’t know any other way to say it,” Ternyik says with a shrug. “I just really like plants.”

All around him on this warm spring day, a dozen people are fanned out across the saltwater marsh west of the island, wearing boots and a colorful collection of mud-encrusted outdoor wear. On their hands and knees, they entrust the vegetation Ternyik and his partner brought from Oregon to the earth.

It’s all part of an effort by the Port of Everett and the Army Corps of Engineers to establish this brand new saltwater marsh and its attendant berm. If all goes as planned, 7,200 square meters of vegetation will be planted here, expanding a unique wildlife sanctuary minutes from downtown Everett.

The berm stands out in the distance, 20 yards wide and 1,800 feet long, created last winter from 323,000 cubic yards of dredging spoils taken from the Snohomish River. For the port, it’s a way to dispose of the material and potentially balance future waterfront development by creating a new land mass for the birds and other creatures frequenting the area.

But for Ternyik, 64, it’s another opportunity to use expertise gathered over more than 40 years to create a new community of plants anchoring the marsh and protecting it from the elements.

He and his partner, Otto Husing, came north from their home base on the Oregon coast to bring appropriate species for planting in the area and to advise the port, the corps and project consultant Pentec Environmentals of Edmonds on the best way to get the job done.

Husing, 34, has been working with Ternyik just a short time, and he is clearly still a little in awe.

“Nobody knows plants like him,” Husing says. “He’s internationally known for his work on sand dune stabilization. The vegetation can tell you so much about an environment, and he’s always telling me that the plants can talk to you.”

With no formal training in the field, Ternyik’s laboratories are everywhere, from the coasts of Santa Barbara, Calif., to the south and Vancouver, British Columbia, to the north, from the blue hills of eastern

Oregon to the stark Atlas missile silos of Vandenburg Air Force in California.

At Vandenburg, he created a vegetation zone that stopped the desert sands from covering the missile pads. In Aden, Ore., he helped save the island home of the thousands of huge pelicans who nest there.

“They live on two small islands, and they were eroding away,” Ternyik says. “We were able to preserve them.”

You get the feeling that the latter job was closer to his heart. Ternyik is one of the few allowed by his home state to take in wild birds and other creatures for rehabilitation. He has an affection for raptors, and tells the story of an owl he recently cared for that had been out of the wild for years but was perfectly capable of flying. The problem was that an injury had permanently impaired it’s ability to grip a branch.

Should he be released to an uncertain fate or face a life of perpetual captivity? That was the question facing Ternyik, who acted without hesitation.

“He belonged in the wild, and I figured he had at least a 50-50 chance.” Ternyik says, “You should have seen him take off!”

“It’s just part of the general picture of a man in tune with his environment,” partner Husing says.

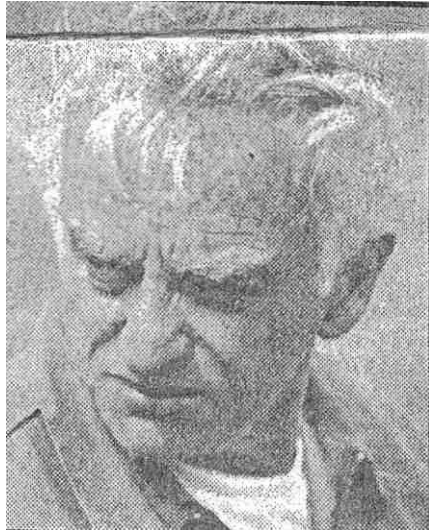
Ternyik will travel most anywhere to promote his causes. He recently returned from testifying on plant stabilization to the U.S. Congress, for the moment casting off his beaten hip boots and putting on the hard shoes.

Almost at the end of another day of his life’s work, Ternyik notices that his co-planters were out of sight of where he is sitting and grabs a shovel. His weathered face cracks into a smile as he gathers up a plant not ordered by the port for this project, but one of which he is particularly fond.

“I’m going to sneak this damn thing into the demonstration plot,” he says like a child staging a sneak attack on the cookie jar.

His subterfuge may have been fun, but it was probably mostly for show.

Even if they catch him, who’s going to argue?



Plant and dune expert Wilbur Ternyik