

# SKETCHES IN THE SAND



People seem to resist change and are often antagonistic toward innovations which break significantly from traditions, even, sometimes, in the face of evidence that the new way, the new product, the new concept, will make life easier for them. In the 1930s and 1940s, for example, when electric companies were extending their power lines into remote rural areas, some farmers and ranchers were scornful of the idea of using electricity for any of their operations. During this same era, many were also vehemently opposed to the newly introduced "Daylight Savings Time."

It is also often true that after sufficient exposure, the new concept, product, or what-have-you may gain gradual or even rapid acceptance. Thus many of the farmers/ranchers who declined to sign up for electricity when offered the opportunity to do so in their farm/ranch homes, later drove as many as 100 miles to participate in a program which they then perceived as a good deal. Nonetheless many who could and eventually did accept and use electricity never changed their watches to DST, proclaiming "When those blankity blank politicians in Washington, D.C. can change the sun, the moon, and the stars, then, by God, I'll change my watch!"

To take an illustration from another continent and another culture, the Shuar (Jívaro) Indians must have thought it strange indeed when the Gospel Missionary Union installed a hydro-electric plant on the Macuma River in tropical Ecuador. After several years of familiarity with electricity on the mission compound, however, many Shuar asked that their homes be supplied with electricity. When telling me about this, they said, with a sly twinkle in their eyes, "so we can read the Bible at night." Keen observers, they knew what proportion of electricity the missionaries used for reading the Bible at night and the amount for sundry other purposes.

To take an example closer to ethnobiology, all science teachers know of the resistance students and the general public have toward learning and using scientific names of plants and animals. Sometimes, however, repeated exposure results in acceptance: witness how easily we say *Chrysanthemum*, *Rhododendron*, and *Gloxinia*.

An amusing incident occurred some years ago as a result of my having taught in my plant geography class the principle that plant species near the limits of their ranges often occur only locally and in specialized habitats. For example, many species which are widespread in the Chihuahuan Desert occur only on calcareous soils at the northern limits of their ranges in southeastern Arizona. Without waiting for the students to ask for examples, I gave several and then, I'm afraid, over-did it a bit with a full blown discussion of my favorite from this group, *Mortonia scabrella* Gray (sandpaper bush), which is locally abundant around Tombstone, Arizona.

As it turns out, the plant communities occurring on calcareous hills near Tombstone have been extensively studied by a number of botanists and ecologists over the years, largely because they are closer to Tucson than several other similar communities. One of the students in this plant geography class decided on the spur of the moment to visit the Tombstone area in order to behold this marvelous plant. In the town itself he saw several "old-timers" chatting in a small park, so he asked them if they could tell him where he could find the large stands of a medium-sized shrub called sandpaper bush. Puzzled, they shook their heads, then one asked, "Does it have any other name?" The student replied, "No. Only the scientific name, *Mortonia scabrella*." Immediately the old-timers smiled. "Mortonia!" they exclaimed. "Everyone knows Mortonia! Why didn't you call it that in the first place?" Then, as one "old-timer" directed him to the stands of *Mortonia*, another muttered in quiet indignation, "Sandpaper bush, indeed ..."

—W.V.