



San Francisco scientists take an unprecedented look at California's redwood trees

By: Mark Tamayo , Lisa Fernandez | Posted: Apr 13 2018

OAKLAND, Calif. - Coastal redwoods and giant sequoia are iconic symbols of California. The species have endured major ecological changes from logging, development and political threats over the past 200 years. Today, the trees are doing better in some respects, but are also facing some of their most significant challenges yet.



These are the findings produced in an unprecedented [“State of the Redwoods Conservation” report](#) – the first comprehensive look at the state’s current status of more than 1.6 million acres of coastal redwood forests and giant sequoia. The hope of the report? To show that the trees' conservation status warrants caution and requires action.

The 26-page report was paid for and compiled by the San Francisco-based Save the Redwoods League, a nonprofit celebrating its 100th anniversary. The information collected over two years will now provide a baseline for the state of the trees.

And the having this baseline is important, according to Emily Burns, the League’s director of science.

“They are really central to California identity and these forests are so important to protect,” she said. “Our goal was really to step back and look at the whole coast redwood ecosystem and the giant sequoia ecosystem to ask...How are they doing today? And what do they need from us to be healthier in the future?”



To come up with answers, League scientists used satellite imagery to track California's redwood trees and flew drones over redwoods in Del Norte County. They meticulously studied the health of the forests across the Golden State including those at Joaquin Miller Park in Oakland, four miles from downtown. It's hard to remember the same park was once home to rampant logging in the early 1800s and 1900s.

"We definitively come here frequently to play in the woods and my dog loves it too," said Julie Wyman on a recent weekday. She came with her daughter to enjoy the trees.

"I come here to get a peace of mind," added Michael Katz, who was strolling among the giants recently, "to have some fresh air."

He paused for a moment to take a breath.

"When I'm here," Katz said, "it's humbling."

Throughout the state, scientists analyzed the age of the trees, key stressors and environmental issues to determine what has been going right, what's been going wrong and what more need to be done to protect the some of the oldest living organisms on the planet.

The verdict? The current state and future for redwood trees and giant sequoia is a mixed bag.

Here are the highlights, according to the scientists' findings:

- **Good:** Almost all of the giant sequoia forest ecosystem is protected in public and tribal ownership. Bad: Trump's efforts to revisit resource extraction and the national monument status poses concern for the current status. And the trend seems to be declining.
- **Bad:** Very little old-growth coast redwood forest remains. "I often imagine what it was like to be back in the 19th century and know what they were thinking," Burns said. "Why did they go up to these large trees and decide to cut them down?" Good: Twenty percent of the redwoods are protected against commercial logging and development. And the trend is improving. "There is such a tremendous opportunity to regrow those logged forests and that is one of the things we are focusing on now," Burns added.
- **Very Bad:** Perhaps the biggest threat is fire. The League scientists found that all of the redwood and giant sequoia forests need improved fuel management to reduce the risk of severe fire in second-growth forests following decades of fire exclusion. The League argues that public funding is urgently needed as 1.4 million acres of forests no longer burn at their historic frequency.

"We need to think about the fuels management," Burns said. "We need to think about reducing how much underbrush has come up in these forests that have not burned for decades. That is a first step. And then letting fires burn though those healthier forests is going to be an asset to the health of these trees."

She added: "We're so afraid of fire, but fire is critical for our redwood forests. It really can be a good thing."

Burns and her team are cautiously optimistic that if they stay vigilant, they will be able to convince the public and policy makers that the redwood forests are crucial to the economic, spiritual and ecological well-being of California.

The Save the Redwoods League is also going to use its report to push their "Yes on Prop. 68" – the California Clean Water and Safe Park Act \$4.1 billion bond to fund parks and water projects in the June election.

"If it passes," she said of the proposition, "it will provide critical funding to taking care of parks like this. The money that is raised through this act will provide funding directly to our clean drinking water and helping take care of places like the redwood forest."

The time is now to act, Burns said: "It's never been a more important time to be investing in redwoods."

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