

Report sounds alarm for Marin's old redwoods

Mark Prado | 04/24/18



Newlyweds Angela and Anthony Dorrel of Dallas head into the forest of old growth redwoods in Muir Woods National Monument on Monday. "It's breathtaking," Angela Dorrel said. "The redwoods are so beautiful." (James Cacciatore/Special to the Marin Independent Journal)

An effort to improve conditions for redwood trees on Mount Tamalpais can help reverse the damage done to the trees by logging, development and fire suppression over the past 150 years.

The Save the Redwoods League has released a new [report](#) outlining some of the challenges facing the trees, which can live up to 2,000 years old.

"Compared to forests of the past, today's redwood forests are fragmented, smaller, and more stressed than ever throughout their range," the report says. "Logging and clear-cutting that began over a century ago destroyed redwood forests on an industrial scale for many decades."

The report notes forest regeneration post-logging “created unnaturally dense forests with high competition among trees for light and water, reduced genetic diversity, and impaired ability to store carbon or provide ample habitat for native species.”

Such is the case on Mount Tamalpais and elsewhere in Marin. Much of Marin’s old-growth redwoods — older than 200 years — are long gone, milled for development locally and in the region.

“Marin is a prime example of how old-growth forests were logged after the Gold Rush,” said Emily Burns, a San Rafael High School and College of Marin graduate who is director of science for Save the Redwoods League. “More redwoods were cut after the 1906 earthquake to rebuild San Francisco.”

That has left damaged redwood forests behind. But Burns said there is hope.

“We are lucky redwoods are resilient to change and they are coming back,” she said. “The good news is these forests are capable of recovery.”

The group One Tam is leading redwood restoration efforts locally. One Tam is part of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy’s Tamalpais Lands Collaborative in which the National Park Service, California State Parks, the Marin Municipal Water District and Marin County have joined forces to care for Mount Tam and other environmentally sensitive areas of Marin.

Of the 6,220 acres of coast redwood forest in Marin, less than 15 percent were protected from logging and can be considered old growth, including at Muir Woods and Steep Ravine, according to a One Tam report.

But the ongoing One Tam Resilient Forests Project is aiming to reduce dead vegetation and open growing space for remaining redwood trees.

“It involves removing a lot of vegetation, as we no longer have the same fire regime to promote the growth of healthy redwood trees,” said Sharon Farrell, acting director of One Tam. “It’s a long-term effort to really improve the health of the forest system.”

Fire can be beneficial for redwoods. As flames rush through a redwood forest, shrubs, plants and debris turn to ash, enriching the soil with nutrients enabling redwood seeds to grow. But allowing fires to burn uncontrolled is not practical in Marin with its wildland-urban interface, officials note.

Statewide, of the historically estimated 2.2 million acres of old growth redwoods, only 113,000 acres remain, meaning 95 percent have disappeared. Overall, there are 1.6 million acres of redwoods ecosystem in California, according to the Save the Redwoods League report released last week.

“All that logging is one of the reasons Muir Woods was protected,” Burns said. “William Kent realized there was a real risk to that special place.”

It was Kent who hatched the plan to save Muir Woods while others around him clamored for the valley to be leveled so its redwoods could be used for lumber and its creek dammed for water.

On Jan. 9, 1908, Roosevelt proclaimed those 295 acres the Muir Woods National Monument, the seventh monument created under the 1906 Antiquities Act and the first from land donated by a private individual. Kent insisted it be named after naturalist John Muir.

This week, tourists from around the world strolled under the shade of the massive trees.

“They are amazing and inspiring,” said Jay Campbell of Mercer, Pennsylvania. “We can see the majesty in what was created for us in these things. They are beautiful. Stunning. Massive.”

Newlyweds Anthony and Angela Dorrel of Dallas walked among the big trees, taking in their scale.

“This is one of those other-worldly things you don’t see anywhere else in the world,” Anthony said.

Said Angela: “It’s breathtaking. The redwoods are so beautiful.”