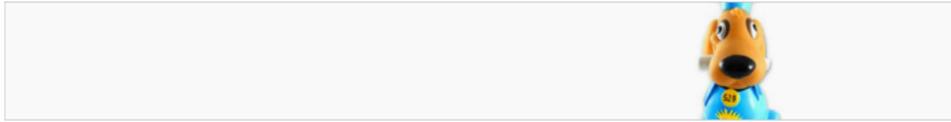


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Saving a noble forest

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By The Washington Times

Wednesday, February 16, 2005

John Muir called the giant sequoia "the noblest of a noble race." These massive trees, the largest in the world, only grow in the Sierra Nevada. Huge sugar pine and other large trees surround them. "They are giants among giants," wrote Berkeley Professor Joseph Le Conte when he saw the giant sequoia forest for the first time in 1870.

Today 7 times more trees than is natural crowd this irreplaceable forest and each year it becomes denser. The forest is unhealthy and the fire hazard is extreme. Yet we have done little to solve the problem.

Now extremists are suing to block a plan by the Forest Service to deal with the wildfire crisis in the Giant Sequoia National Monument. This modest plan calls for removing too few trees to offset even the new trees that grow each year. To be effective, the plan should remove more trees to halt excess growth and substantially reduce the existing trees.

It seems some people have forgotten the McNally Fire of 2002 that burned 151,000 acres and came within less than a mile of the sequoia groves. Jim Paxon, speaking for firefighters, said, "If fire does get in the Trail of 100 Giants, we won't be putting firefighters in there to try to stop it."

I know this forest better than most people do. I began in the late 1960s as a ranger in Kings Canyon National Park, working on the first prescribed fires and interpreting them to the public. I also did research with my colleague the late Edward C. Stone (University of California-Berkeley professor) on this forest over the next three decades. Our work forms the basis for the Forest Service plan to restore the Monument.

In the 1960s, the Park Service cut intermediate-size trees before using prescribed fire. They knew prescribed fire is a crude tool that can do more collateral damage to a forest than good. The most recent example is the damage it did to the George Washington Tree. However, a chain saw in an expert's hands is surgically precise. As the late A. Starker Leopold, professor and former chief scientist of the National Park Service, said, "A chain saw would do wonders."

Unfortunately, extremists stopped the Park Service from cutting trees, and decades of destruction by prescribed fire followed. They would rather see whole forests burn than cut individual trees to save the forests.

There are twice as many intermediate-size trees (up to 30 inches in diameter) today as in the historic forest because fire was excluded for 125 years. Prescribed fire cannot reduce the number of trees this size without severely damaging the forest.

In addition, few people realize that unnaturally thick litter now covering the ground generates so much heat when it burns that even a small fire can kill large trees by cooking their roots. The loss of thousands of huge trees from prescribed fire has become rampant in national parks.

In 1976, Mr. Stone and I warned the Park Service of this terrible loss. A Park Service study found we were right, but the Service ignored its own study and us and the destruction continues.

Now the Park Service has added the 3,000-year-old Washington Tree to the casualties from their prescribed fires. This is the world's second-largest tree, named for the Father of Our Country. Even so, the Park Service refused to protect it from a fire they deliberately let burn.

The fire took six weeks to reach the tree. The Park Service had plenty of time to act. It stood back and watched the fire destroy the tree's top and largest branch, which weakened it so much a recent storm broke it in half. It probably will die.

How could the Park Service let its own prescribed fire destroy a national treasure and many other giant trees? They all could have been saved. It only takes a few minutes and a garden rake to clear thick litter from around a tree to keep fire away.

I cannot speculate why some people would rather see huge trees and whole forests killed by fire rather than use 21st-century knowledge and tools to prevent that destruction. I just know anti-management philosophy is no justification for sacrificing national treasures.

Let's use common sense and the best available science to make decisions about our forests. Our nation will lose too much by acting irrationally. Let Forest Service professionals restore the Giant Sequoia National Monument to its former glory. This is not about politics but about protecting our national heritage.

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