



Inside Canyonlands

Utah Juniper Transcript

Hi folks, I'm Karen Henker at Canyonlands National Park.

The Utah juniper is the classic desert tree. Its stark, twisting branches seem to epitomize the struggle for life in a land with little water. The juniper grows in some of the harshest conditions imaginable, and thrives despite baking heat, bone-chilling cold, fierce winds, intense sunlight and scarce water.

How does it survive these challenging conditions?

Well it all starts with the roots. The juniper taproot can stretch forty feet straight down through the rocks, searching through cracks for trapped water. And its radial root system can stretch 100 feet away from the tree. And these roots are strong: even if knocked over by wind, some junipers can still grow.

Of course, sometimes there's just no water. During a drought, a juniper can actually prune itself. See how much dead material this tree contains? These branches are no longer receiving water. Instead the tree routes all its nutrients to certain branches only...just enough so that the tree can survive, reproduce and wait until conditions get better.

Another interesting fact about the Utah juniper is how slowly they grow. I'm sure "old-growth forest" doesn't really come to mind on a visit to Canyonlands, but many junipers can live 350 or 700 years. Occasionally, one is found to have survived over a thousand years in the desert. But despite this longevity, they rarely grow taller than 30 feet tall.

The juniper plays an important role in the high desert ecosystem of Canyonlands. Its berries...which are actually tiny pinecones in a drought-resistant waxy coating...provide food for animals like birds, coyotes and many rodents. Lots of animals nest in junipers, and humans have used juniper logs for centuries... in the construction of dwellings, as fence posts and, of course, as firewood.

And best of all, junipers can provide some much needed shade on a hot summer day!

I'm Karen Henker. Thanks for joining me on Inside Canyonlands.