

Redwood



Redwood National & State Parks

Redwood burl poaching background and update

April 14, 2014

In 1850, nearly 2,000,000 acres of old-growth coast redwood forests spanned the California coast between Monterey and the Oregon border. Due to commercial logging, less than 5% of that original old-growth forest remains.

Nearly all old-growth redwood forest, and thus the availability of old-growth redwood burl, is contained within the protected boundaries of Redwood National and State Parks and several State Parks in northern California.

Coast redwoods regenerate one of two ways: from seedlings which have a low survival rate (1-3%), and from burls, dormant bud material that develops in bumpy, bulbous knobs that can occur anywhere on the tree, most commonly near the ground. Redwood burls develop slowly as the tree grows, and can range from the size of a softball, to several feet thick and in diameter.

When burls are cut from coast redwoods, it significantly injures the tree in different ways:

- Redwood bark provides a thick, insulating layer that protects the tree from insect infestation, fire and disease. By removing the bark and the cambium (the growing layer of the tree), the inner heartwood of the tree is exposed, increasing the risk of insect or fire damage and disease. The defacement of trees creates entry points for pathogens from which the tree may not recover.
- Since the burl is a primary tool for coast redwood reproduction, removing the burl may deny the tree its primary method of regeneration. A burl from a 2000 year old coast redwood can initiate growth of a new tree that can live for another 2000 years, thus the Latin name for coast redwoods, *Sequoia sempervirens*, which means “forever living”.
- If the cuts are extensive, as has been in a number of cases, the structural integrity of the tree can be weakened to a point where it is threatened by high winds, floods, or saturated ground. In these situations, the canopy of the tree can also suffer extensive dieback and reduced vigor, further stressing the tree.

Redwood National and State Parks have experienced an increase in the illegal cutting and theft of old-growth coast redwood burls in recent years. The number of incidents of burl and wood theft have increased, as have the size of the burls being removed from living old-growth redwood trees.

Burl poaching involves the cutting of live burls from both live and dead trees, felling of living old-growth redwood trees to access burls from higher up the stem, and the cutting of down logs for both ornamental furniture and construction materials.

Burl poaching has been occurring on a small scale for years in the parks. There appears to be an increase both in the amount of activity and the size of burls being taken in recent years. Recent discoveries include:

- A burl nearly 8' tall, 5' wide, and 4' deep taken from one tree.

- On another tree, at least 15 burls were removed ranging as large as 6' tall and 4' wide. The cuts completely encircled the old-growth redwood tree.
- A 4' diameter, 150' tall, 400 year old tree was cut down entirely to reach a large burl about 50' above the ground.
- 5 individual old-growth trees in one location next to a park road were targeted with 24 burls cut from those trees, likely in a single evening.

This uncontrolled and illegitimate cutting impacts the prime resource of RNSP, a designated World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve, and includes related impacts to scenic qualities and potential impact on threatened and endangered species such as the marbled murrelet.

Redwood trees, particularly old growth trees, can be stressed from drought or climate change, increased tree density from years of fire suppression, proximity to young second growth (altered micro-climate), and diverted hydrology reducing available moisture. The cutting and removal of burls adds additional stress that may lead to disease, canopy dieback and death.

Similarly, the canopy vigor and photosynthetic production can be reduced, depending on the size and scale of the defacement, reducing the capacity of the tree to heal and persist long-term. Even if the tree were to survive, it may do so with a reduced canopy complexity for decades as the wounds heal, which can have ripple effects on the plants and animals that utilize the habitat created by these trees, particularly threatened species.

Park law enforcement rangers are currently conducting several investigations in Humboldt County and Del Norte County regarding theft and damage to redwood trees inside Redwood National and State Parks. We are being proactive in aggressively enforcing the law by investigating poaching cases and, just as importantly, conducting increased law enforcement patrols.

The park has made wood/burl poaching arrests and brought charges, in conjunction with county district attorney's offices, for felony theft in recent years.

Investigations and reports are indicating that some of this material is being distributed to vendors outside of the local area and even beyond the western US.

Investigations are indicating that the black market for these materials is an income source for drug users and those with criminal histories..

Because of the large geographic areas in RNSP, it is difficult to cover the entire area with existing staff, but we are implementing numerous patrol and surveillance strategies to address the problem.

Burl poaching is also occurring on other adjacent public lands

The consumer market for redwood burl is active. Virtually all of the demand is for purely decorative products: coffee tables, jewelry boxes, salad bowls, knife handles, fireplace mantles, etc. These products often sell for hundreds or even thousands of dollars. A quick online search on "redwood burl" elicits several pages of vendors selling raw burls and finished burl products.

There are legitimate sources for these materials on private property, but the supply is diminishing, which appears to be leading to ever increasing take on public lands.

The parks do not want to interfere with legitimate businesses that market this material from legitimate sources, but we are getting reports that some are not in the habit of questioning the source.

Consumers need to question the source of the ornamental wood materials they are purchasing. Buyers should ask vendors for proof of where their wood products come from, and if they are unsure of the answer, don't buy them.

America's National Parks and California's State Parks have been created to preserve and protect the best and most important of our nation's natural and cultural resources, scenic beauty and human history, for the public's enjoyment, now and into the future. A crime against these precious park resources is a crime against the American people.

If you have information regarding wood or burl theft within Redwood National and State Parks, please call the park's "Crime Line" at 707-465-7353.

For additional information, please contact:

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