

EUCALYPTUS TREES:

Separating Fact from Fiction About These Beautiful, Beneficial Trees

Over 400,000 trees in the East Bay are slated to fall to the chainsaw, including Eucalyptus, Monterey Pine, and Acacia. Although all are scheduled for clear-cutting, proponents of deforestation hold out a special hatred of Eucalyptus. In fact, they have worked tirelessly to turn public opinion in the East Bay against Eucalyptus trees since the Firestorm of 1991. Chief among their claims is that these trees were to blame for the ferocity of that fire because we are told they possess unusually high quantities of volatile oils that make them more flammable and prone to shooting off embers which enable the spread of fire. These claims have been repeated so many times they are often regarded as self-evident, even though the science does not support them.

David Maloney, a former Oakland Firefighter and Chief of Fire Prevention at the Oakland Army Base, is instructive: "Such a determination is putting ideological or economic considerations ahead of the safety of firefighters and the public, and gives rise to propagandistic statements which are designed to scare the public, which have no basis in fire science... Fire Science has proven that every living tree -- regardless of its species -- due to its moisture content and canopy coverage of ground fuels, contributes to wildfire hazard mitigation." For example, fog drip has been measured in Monterey pines in the East Bay at over 10 inches per year. In San Francisco, fog drip in the Eucalyptus forest was measured at over 16 inches per year.

Moreover, Bay Laurels, a preferred species by "native" plant advocates, possess higher oil content than Eucalyptus, Acacia, and Monterey Pine and yet these trees will not be removed. According to Cornell University, essential/volatile oils in Blue Gum Eucalyptus leaves range from less than 1.5 to about 3.5%. The leaves of California Bay Laurel trees, by contrast, contain 7.5% of



Iconically Californian, towering and majestic, Eucalyptus have been a favorite theme of California painters for well over a century.



Above: The 2003 Scripps Ranch fire in San Diego burned 150 homes, but not Eucalyptus trees abutting many of those homes.

EUCALYPTUS FACTS

- Over 100 species of birds use Eucalyptus trees as habitat.
- Monarch butterflies depend on Eucalyptus during the winter.
- Eucalyptus trees increase biodiversity. A 1990 survey in Tilden Park found 38 different species beneath the main canopy of Eucalyptus forests, compared to only 18 in Oak woodlands.
- In a climate such as the San Francisco Bay Area, Eucalyptus trees can live 400-500 years. As such, the oldest trees in the East Bay have plenty of life left in them.
- Eucalyptus trees benefit other trees. Eucalyptus forest boundaries remain stable and in fact, Eucalyptus forests in the Bay Area have naturally declined between 1939 and 1997. Meanwhile, they create an environment for other trees—like California Coast live Oaks and California Bay trees—to grow beneath them.

essential/volatile oils, more than twice the amount of oil in leaves of Blue Gums.

Not only are Eucalyptus trees "very fire resistant" according to Maloney, but they are majestic and beautiful, provide nesting sites for hawks, owls and other birds, are one of the few sources of nectar for Northern California bees in the winter, prevent soil erosion in the hills, trap particulate pollution all year around, sequester carbon and benefit other species of trees.

Indeed, one of the reasons why Oaks are growing under the canopy of the Eucalyptus forest is that they are being irrigated by the fog drip from the Eucalyptus. They are also being sheltered from the wind, which dries out the trees and the forest floor. These trees are unlikely to survive on the south-facing slopes when the Eucalyptus are destroyed because they did not grow on the south-facing slopes prior to settlement. It's too dry and windy for them. So cutting down Eucalyptus trees will also kill trees native plant ideologues claim to value.

Given that Eucalyptus trees are so beautiful and environmentally beneficial, why do proponents of deforestation want to clearcut them? They claim that the trees are "non-native," a pejorative term based on an idea we have thoroughly rejected in our treatment of our fellow human beings -- that the value of a living being can be reduced merely to its place of origin. But even accepting the unscientific underlying premise that the word can and should be divided into two camps: "native" plants and animals who are worthy of protecting and "non-native" plants and animals who deserve to die, the claim that Eucalyptus trees, which can be found growing all over California, are "non-native" is being challenged as well. Since Eucalyptus readily hybridizes with other species, some claim "we might now have some California eucalyptus hybrids that could rightly be considered native, or at least have earned full citizenship."

Excerpt from *Weed Whackers: Monsanto, Glyphosate, and the War on Invasive Species*

"California native-plant partisans are a committed lot, and not only in their dislike of eucalyptus trees. Many of them are influential in local government, and they yearn to restore the treeless "native" grassland that greeted the first European settlers of the Bay Area in 1769. (For centuries, Native Americans had cleared the trees to facilitate hunting.) ... Over the next few years, more than 450,000 trees in Oakland, Berkeley, and neighboring areas are due to be destroyed in the name of "wildfire-risk reduction..."

On close examination, ... examples of the damage said to be caused by exotic invaders look... questionable. The supposedly super combustible eucalyptus, for example, survives fires that consume surrounding plant life — and rather than unfairly appropriating water, the tree actually irrigates soil by absorbing moisture from the coastal fogs through its leaves and funneling it out

through its roots. (Though still cited as the prime culprit in the devastating 1991 Oakland firestorm, the eucalyptus was in fact cleared of responsibility in a FEMA report.) Monarch butterflies belie its reputation for repelling wildlife, the eucalyptus being their favored wintering abode in California.

Mark Davis, a professor of biology at Macalester College and a frequent critic of anti-invasive hysteria, put it ... pungently. "It's the same perspective as ISIS wanting to re-create the seventh-century caliphate," he remarked. "It's ecological fundamentalism, the notion that the purity of the past has been polluted by outsiders." Far from crowding out native species, he argued, invasives tend to move into areas that have been ravaged, or at least disturbed, by human activity."

- Andrew Cockburn, *Harper's Magazine*, September 2015
<http://harpers.org/archive/2015/09/weed-whackers/2/>