



# WHAT WE ARE WITNESSING IS A NATIONAL DISGRACE!

*The needless destruction of national treasures. By Jim Petersen, the Evergreen Foundation*

**T**he oldest, tallest, and largest trees on Earth live in California—at least for now. The oldest, a bristlecone pine named Methuselah, is thought to be about 4,850 years old. It lives high in the arid White Mountains in Inyo National Forest somewhere near the California/Nevada border. For security reasons, its exact location is not disclosed by the Forest Service. The tallest, Hyperion, a coast redwood, soars 380 feet into Northern California's Redwood National Park. It was found in 2006 and is approximately 900 years old. The largest, a 2,200-year-old sequoia named General Sherman, is a mere 275 feet tall but is 37 feet in diameter and more than 102 feet in circumference. It hosts thousands of admiring visitors every year and towers over everything else that



grows in Sequoia National Park near Visalia.

General Sherman got some unwanted publicity last year when wildland firefighters wrapped its base in foil to protect it from the raging KNP Complex, an 88,000-acre conflagration that killed thousands of sequoias. The General's three-foot-thick bark would have protected it from most fires, but the National Park Service wasn't taking any chances with its most valuable public treasure. Moreover, the worldwide publicity generated by the September 16 photo was its own gold.

Subtleties aside, National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service public relations specialists are working frantically to convince skeptical publics that the West's wildfire pandemic is a direct result of a century of purposefully excluding fire from fire-prone forests, exacer-





LEFT: High fuel loads burn hot and will kill green trees in all forest stands.

OPPOSITE TOP: Dead, previously fire-scarred, monarch giant sequoias (note forester at base) in the Freeman Creek Grove that had survived centuries of wildfires but could not survive the foolishness of modern “environmentalism.” The fuel loads surrounding these trees were prevented from being mitigated due to the Sierra Club campaign to remove active forest management from giant sequoia groves. A vast majority of the flammable understory trees in this area had grown up in the last 60 years.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: General Sherman is wrapped in foil to protect it from the raging KNP Complex, an 88,000-acre conflagration that killed thousands of sequoias.

bated by climate change. Lost in the left-wing media thrall is any sense of the history of federal forestry in the West or the protective roles played by thinning and prescribed fire in the decades following World War II.

Those decades came to a swift end on Forest Service lands after the government listed the northern spotted owl as a threatened species in 1990. The federal timber-sale program collapsed amid a nightmarishly complex regulatory process easily contained by serial litigators. Environmental organizations that oppose all forms of forest management have been monumentally successful in turning public opinion against lumbermen and loggers who provided vital markets for public timber in the postwar years.

This has come amid growing skepticism of the Forest Service’s ability to successfully navigate politically driven regulatory processes tightly controlled by anti-forestry activists who have outspent hesitant lumbermen by a factor of 100 to one over the last 40 years.

The collapse of the Forest Service timber-sale program, the reconfiguring of vertically integrated companies that owned land and manufacturing facilities for more than 100 years, and the parallel creation of Real Estate Investments and Timber Investment Management Organizations have left the government with fewer than 100 companies willing to buy and process logs generated by thinning projects.

The neglectful and avoidable removal from the managed forestland base of millions of acres of federal timber over the last 30 years—including great losses in no-harvest old-growth reserves that had been created when the spotted owl was listed and the California owl restrictions were implemented—sparked deep anger and resentment in the

**The destruction in giant sequoia groves in the 2020 and 2021 fire seasons has been a jolt of reality for the entire nation. The devastation to the iconic and fire-resistant sequoias themselves from the outlawing of active forest management and the subsequent hot fires carried by thick stands of dense, untreated fuels is truly mind-numbing.**

rural, wildfire-knowledgeable West, but major media outlets paid scant attention. It was not until they saw The General wrapped in glistening foil that they began to ask more-penetrating questions.

Which brings us to the groves in Giant Sequoia National Monument which abut Sequoia National Park. Logging had occurred in Sequoia National Forest, but it essentially stopped with creation of the monument—a direct result of Sierra Club litigation that left the U.S. Forest Service (caretaker of the monument) with no options for reducing tree density in groves that were choked by dense stands of highly flammable young-growth conifers.

In recent testimony before the House Committee on Natural Resources, Kent Dusen—who runs Sierra Forest Products, a lumber manufacturer founded by his father in the



Fuel break on Giant Sequoia National Monument property adjacent to the Tule River tribe property that was burned through by 2017’s Pier Fire. This fuel break in a portion of the Black Mountain Grove was called the Tule River Protection Project and was finished in 2015. It was proposed by the Tule River tribe under authority to protect tribal lands from wildfires that are generated from adjacent Sequoia National Park property. It demonstrates the type of fuels management that is proven to save giant sequoias in the age of extreme fuel loads—magnificent trees protected by common sense and rational management.



late 1960s in Terra Bella, Calif.—spoke about the thinning the company did in Sequoia National Forest in the 1980s.

“We worked on three or four Forest Service sales that thinned the white woods from the giant sequoia groves,” he recalled. “When we finished the projects, the groves looked like a park. The Forest Service planted seedlings in the [thinned] groves, including young giant sequoias. There was also some natural regeneration that sprouted. It makes me sick to see our groves burnt black. If they haven’t burned yet, they are so overgrown that they are ripe to burn in the next fire.”

Ranking committee member Bruce Westerman (Arkansas), the only forester in the 435-member House of Representatives, added a timely sense of urgency to Duysen’s testimony. “Not on our watch,” he said of increasing House interest in tackling the West’s wildfire crisis. “We are not going to let these trees be destroyed by wildfire when we know how to prevent it. We know the right thing to do. We just have to do it.” (The “do it” part is the thinning and stand tending work that has been championed by the nonprofit Evergreen Foundation and *Evergreen*, its periodic journal, for 30-plus years.)

“We are seeing it [the result of thinning] now in the Mariposa Grove, where the fire dropped down [to the ground]. It got to these areas that have been managed and it dropped down.

“We need urgent action,” Westerman said, referring to proposed Save Our Sequoias legislation that would increase the pace and scale of thinning work in groves that have become ready-to-burn thickets. “When you think about something that has been around for

millennia, it’s sad that we’re to the point where we need to act within days or weeks. We [can’t] wait until next year. We need to be doing the work in winter to prepare for next year’s fire season.”

Despite the urgency that Westerman characterizes, environmentalists haven’t altered their story line in decades—except to add climate change to their list of reasons why the West’s forests are dying and burning. Solutions? None. Just continue to dig up the past.

## **Environmentalists haven’t altered their story line in decades—except to add climate change to their list of reasons why the West’s forests are dying and burning. Solutions? None.**

Blame logging and, for heaven’s sake, never mention that controlled and measurable forest management, including logging, enjoyed wide public and congressional support for decades following World War II.

No environmental organization has been better at blaming logging than the Sierra Club. A March 2000 Sierra Club Sequoia Task Force Alert written by the Task Force chair, “Giant Sequoia National Monument: A Birthday Present for John Muir and the World,” expressed her joy that President Clinton had decided to use the 1906 Antiquities Act to “protect” giant sequoias from lumbermen who were “hauling our ancient forests to the bank.”

She wrote: “The forest will *not burn down* for lack of commercial logging! Management options for the groves will reflect the same nurturing given the groves within the adjacent Sequoia National Park. The park cuts trees only for safety of the forest or the public, not for commercial profit. Park forests are much more fire resistant than the heavily logged USFS lands.

“Controlled burns, let-burn policies and conservative, reasonable measures including minimal cutting could occur,” she continued. “Revenue to the counties from logging is already declining because of lack of competitive bidding, past overlogging and concerns for the survival of species that rely on unlogged forests; even without [m]onument status, the fixture of logging revenues is shaky. On the other hand, an increase in revenues from recreation-related activities is almost certain as the public flocks to the nation’s newest national monument.”

This three-page memo was unearthed by our Evergreen colleague, Chris Conrad, who I first met in Show Low, Ariz., in May 2003, nine months after the Rodeo-Chediski Fire wiped out 469,000 acres of mostly old-growth ponderosa forest in northern Arizona. Chris tracked me down two years ago to suggest that I pay keen attention to the unfolding sequoia story. I did—and the story is easily as sickening as Kent Duysen said it was in his recent congressional testimony.

How bad is it? See Chris’ chart on the next page comparing the estimated number of large giant sequoias killed by heavy-fuels-driven wildfires over the last 60 years to the numbers that have been killed by loggers in that same 60-year period.

PHOTOS COURTESY EVERGREEN FOUNDATION & CHRIS CONRAD



PHOTO © RICK ANDREW



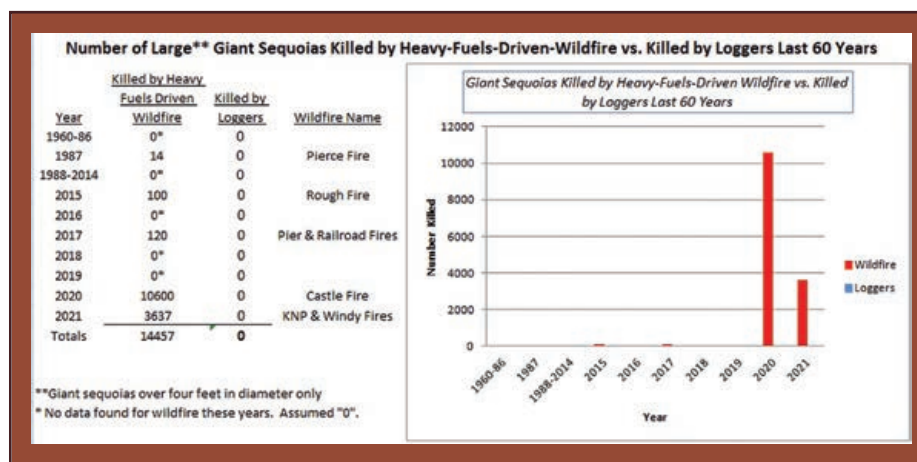
**LEFT:** Open forest conditions save forests and save big trees when wildfires burn through them. **RIGHT:** Unmanaged understory in the USFS portion of the Alder Creek Grove within the sequoia monument caused heavy mortality in the grove. A nongovernment damage assessment team walks through dead giant sequoias. Unmanaged hillside in the distance shows extent of damage within the monument outside of the grove area.



Giant sequoias survived the Pier Fire which burned through the Black Mountain Grove in 2017. These surviving and still healthy trees are within one of the units on a timber sale from which the USFS had removed all of the non-sequoia understory trees in the mid-1980s to protect and regenerate the giant sequoias within specific areas. Tall trees in

background are edge of fuel reduction. Past USFS timber sales in the sequoia groves didn't threaten the giant sequoias; they helped protect them.

ABOVE RIGHT: This table and graph illustrate that it is not logging that is killing today's giant sequoias but the lack of forest management. The evidence of the last 60 years proves how farcical it is to continue to blame logging for sequoia damage. Today's megafires driven by heavy, unmitigated fuel loads are killing giant sequoias on a scale greater than ever seen in unrestrained timber harvest prior to the forest conservation movement.



Note that a "large" giant sequoia is defined as one that is four feet or more in diameter at its base (size standard set by H.T. Harvey, et al., 1980). Since 1960, not one sequoia of this size has been "hailed to the bank" by a "greedy" logger. But as many as 14,457 giant sequoias have died in wildfires, including 10,600 in the 2020 Castle Fire and 3,637 in the 2021 KNP Complex.

So much for the Sierra Club's "fantastic birthday present" for John Muir, who founded the organization in San Francisco in 1892. Muir wanted desperately to save California's sequoias from loggers and he said so in an essay he wrote for *Atlantic Monthly* in 1897. "Any fool can destroy trees," he declared. "They cannot run away; and if they could, they would still be destroyed—chased and hunted down as long as fun or a dollar could be got out of their bark hides, branching horns or magnificent bole backbones. Few that fell trees plant them; nor would planting avail much towards getting back anything like the noble primeval forests."

How I wish Muir could see Chris Conrad's chart. What would he say about the death and destruction the Sierra Club Task Force chair and her colleagues have caused in forests they profess to love? Does their hatred for forest management have any limits? It doesn't seem so. What would Muir think about the Sierra Club's willingness to allow his giant sequoias to die fiery deaths?

Chris also connected me to Del Pengilly, a retired Forest Service district ranger who worked for 27 years in Sequoia National Forest. He recalls several timber sales in the 1980s designed to remove whitewoods—mainly white fir and ponderosa pine—that posed a

fire risk to sequoias.

The crush of Sierra Club administrative appeals reached the breaking point in the late 1980s, but a Mediated Settlement Agreement was finally reached that Pengilly says would have allowed more whitewoods to be removed. "The Sierra Club and other so-called conservation groups continued to file appeals and lawsuits to any action that was

**"Let burn is a terrible idea, especially during prolonged drought. If we don't reverse course soon, we will lose our sequoia groves."**

tied to a timber sale even after the MSA was signed by most participants."

Pengilly still believes the Forest Service could protect the groves if it had the opportunity to use every available management tool, including the long-gone thinning/prescribed-fire program—a safe, reliable and proven method for controlling stand density that other forest owners use constantly.

"The Sierra Club was against any timber sale when I was district ranger on the Tule District," Pengilly recalls. "Several revised monument proposals have been written, appealed and litigated since 2000. It will be very difficult for the Forest Service to protect the groves—or any national forest—with the workforce and funding [it has], more litigation and lack of political support."

Pengilly is adamant about the fact that today's wildfires are larger and more frequent because we aren't controlling density, prompt

initial attack is lacking, and incompetent people are trying to herd fires that should have been put out as quickly as possible. His conclusion: "Let burn is a terrible idea, especially during prolonged drought. If we don't reverse course soon, we will lose our sequoia groves."

Chris Conrad agrees. "What we are witnessing is a national disgrace. As a forester who loves the woods, I can testify that walking through these burned-out groves is enough to make anyone sick to his stomach. The mindless destruction was totally avoidable and is overwhelming proof that the foolishness of the Environmental Left has no boundaries."

Conrad continues: "There are Americans who believe the only way to stop these killing fires is to first kill the free enterprise system. Kill forestry, farming, ranching and fossil fuels. These are nihilistic ideas that have no place in our society. The destruction of the sequoia groves is a demarcation line. There is no 'build back better' when a 2,000-year-old tree dies. The Sierra Club and the Environmental Left own this tragedy. We tried their way and it doesn't work. We cannot continue to meet these insane ideas halfway. Our forests and our nation will not survive if we don't put common sense back to work on the land. It's called forestry. It deals with reality. We need to empower it. Wrapping sequoia giants in aluminum foil is shameless political theater that only communicates what failed forest policies look like." ■

*Jim Petersen is the president and founder of the nonprofit Evergreen Foundation. For more info go to [www.evergreenmagazine.com](http://www.evergreenmagazine.com). Chris Conrad is a forester who has been employed in the private sector for the last 49 years.*