Perspectives on Cultural Values of California Oaks[1]

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Abstract

The status and prospects of oaks—those native to California and the many elsewhere—are insufficiently known, despite historical volumes of work done in the past and more ongoing today. That globally there is a blistering diversity of oaks in different environments, and put to distinct uses, is beyond dispute. Less agreed upon, though, is their complex history and the variation in the nature of the oak woodland. Because oak landscapes are so varied, and yet so ubiquitous, perhaps their one single shared feature worldwide is a multiplicity of uses. If individual oaks are cherished, and sometimes known by name, the larger woodlands that they comprise are ecosystems of formidable complexity. That is known; what is not is how best to value oak woodlands—and California's in particular. Different attempts have been made; what is crucial to the continued well-being of California's oak woodlands is coming up with some scheme that makes valuation credible, shareable, inclusive, and understandable.

Introduction

What's an oak worth, and why? We start, perhaps, with the single solitary oak, standing in isolation as a first forlorn beacon of possibility, but auguring a once far-larger past presence. But how, then, to value an entire woodland of oaks, a feature that has altogether another aspect? Or even more, what of an entire cultural and economic way of life, a community that goes with the woodland? The issue of putting a value to oaks, considering how a dollar figure or even a tribute to their ecological or spiritual worth might be set, is hardly an insignificant question, especially for a gathering such as this Symposium on Oak Woodlands.

The stories in California alone of setting a value for oaks are legend, of course, and I haven't the least doubt that you could identify appropriate examples. But to start the race, consider these few cases: A handsome oak on a Marin County property adds a cool $50,000 to a starter-castle's sales value, even in the halcyon pre-dot-com days; the town council of Dublin pays out $70,000 to build a steel support for one oak downtown (Davis 2002). In fact, Rick Standiford and Tom Scott have work already going that documents the value of individual or localized oaks (2002).

Or contemplate the rerouting of that long-planned road through a gated community in the Diablo Valley, realigned at astronomical cost, to avoid impinging on the roots of a particularly choice oak specimen. A conservation easement to a well-wooded East Bay ranch, through sales of development rights, is taken on to protect no fewer than eight different species considered to be of "essential" value,

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and funds from the transaction permit another ranching generation to stay on the land. And never does the lingo of the realtor or developer trill better or more loudly than when the bragging words "oak" or "ranch" can be added to an estate or subdivision's name.

These examples demonstrate that the values of oaks are often as much spiritual or aesthetic as pecuniary *(fig. 1)*. Those who seek to understand oaks as a landscape element need to recognize these diverse cultural values if we want to ensure that oaks continue to persist. Many things to many people; that's the oak. But why, then, is the woodland slowly waning? It's a supply that can't meet demand. And creating an oak woodland is truly a long-term effort. After the effects of "rangeland clearing" and other state-initiated hardwood range modifications of the post-World War II era, oaks have become increasingly rare. Those remaining are prized.

Figure 1—No happenstance is afoot in the naming of the Church of the Oaks in Cotati; the juxtaposition of faith with long-lived trees is a human practice of considerable duration. (Photograph by P. F. Starrs, 2000)

Contemplating the value of oaks, especially in cultural merit, is a dicey undertaking, made especially so by an abysmal abiding ignorance about what nature is innately worth. Oaks and the values they embody are remarkably complex: On their own they have existence value; they have a separate scale and stature and ledger for their products; and woodlands collectively have worth as an entire ecosystem. Good luck figuring out the value of the whole of an "ecosystem"—in that there is waiting someone's Nobel Prize in economics. Yet as parts or entire, a woodland of oaks is highly sought after, and few elements of a natural system have such diverse values individually, but so murky a pricing scheme as a whole. An oak is worth something determinable as a live tree or as firewood or as habitat or as an acorn source, but even some of those numbers are contradictory: a live tree can't also be felled as firewood. There is further value of the oak as wildlife habitat, as carbon

sink, as biodiversity. While the single oak has a calculable value, the oak woodland is so capacious, so complex, that it's difficult to appraise its price in an enduring, agreed-upon, and universal way. The constituencies and valuations are diverse.

In this, oak woodlands are not that unlike other valued elements of a natural system. For instance, from the 1930s to the 1950s, the loss of soil from American farmlands was a topic of vast scholarly concern; how to document the cost of soil loss, and how to invest in the arresting of soil depletion? With the 1960s and *Silent Spring,* pesticide use became an obsession; in the '90s, the bogeyman became biodiversity's diminution. We might do well to consider conservation and *Quercus* as a millennial concern—and thankfully, many of you associated with oak conservation already have. But at what cost and who is to bear those costs *(fig. 2)*?

Figure 2—The considerable size and reach of valley oaks has done little to reduce their susceptibility to development and clearing; although livestock find alluring their shade and canopy, it has been left up to planners and ordinances to attempt enduring protection. (Photograph by P. F. Starrs, 1988)

Costs and Returns

The fact is that actually going through the processes of setting a value for oaks isn't something we are particularly good at. Ongoing is significant work by Rick Standiford, Pablo Campos, Lynn Huntsinger, and others toward the "total economic value" of oak woodland sites (Campos and others 2002). But so far—and that may change for the better—such studies constitute but an added tool on the economist's belt, rather than a key indicator for the student of cultural studies. Sure, we "like" oaks, we "value" oaks, we "cherish" oaks, oaks are officially part of some towns' "heritage," and are central in many a subdivision's name. We even name towns after oaks—Oakville, Oakdale, Fair Oaks, Live Oak, Paso Robles, Encino, or, in a

charming if singular case, "Bellota," after the Spanish word for acorn. Yet setting an actual value is something far different now than it was seventy-five years ago *(fig. 3)*.

Figure 3—The small community of Bellota, in the Sacramento Valley, has little notion of the significance of its namesake; "Bellota" is the Spanish word for acorn. Nonetheless, around this exurban hamlet oaks abound. The name itself reflects a curiosity about oaks of long duration. (Photograph by P. F. Starrs, 1998)

Certainly our skills as appraisers are bankrupt now as compared to those of our ancestors. They knew what an oak was for, and what it was worth: they knew understory and overstory, fungi and tannin, they understood game animals and acorn mast and forage and branches pruned for conversion to oak charcoal or firewood. Why, we ought to ask ourselves, have we forgotten? What does that say about where our society has gone, and the pathologies of our current deviation from the norm?

Our separation is from the world: that separation as professors, teachers, government employees, researchers, agency personnel, students or ranchers, has brought us to a point where the quite marvelous diversity, productivity, and richness in uses of an oak woodland fails to be foremost in our minds. Buying into a doctrine of parts, we have come to a point where we see not the forest, not even the trees, but

only elements of a particular problem: a disease, or a site, or a species, or a fire, or a genome or clade; the grove is part of reductionist science, and indifferent to policy. All but lost is the sheer joy and pleasure in how woodlands look, smell, feel, sound, and taste. Our loss, indeed *(fig. 4)*.

Figure 4—The foothills of the Diablo Range in the East Bay reflect twin pressures of preservation and development as readily as any other California landscape. Not only are orchard crops long gone, the oaks are at risk as the burgeoning development in Alamo, Blackhawk, and other high-ticket suburban communities accelerates with the economic imperative of local growth. (Photograph by P. F. Starrs, 1987)

In 1776, José de Cañizares, a Spanish sailor and accomplished cartographer, produced a map that included detailed (if less than precise) renditions of oaks as a recognizable element of the Bay Area landscape *(fig. 5)*. For these Spanish navigators Alta California was a visually familiar landscape, and for that all the more attractive a stopping-off point. And less than a hundred years later, in 1869, Joachim Richardt delivered a painting that, no less than the Cañizares map, was accurately placed. It showed the oak-draped junction of Madison and 8th Street, in the eponymously-named town of Oakland, California. The point is simple: our perception of the oak woodland, which once involved observing a feature that was visually dominant, has changed from something collective and respectful into an isolated recognition of individual heritage-grade trees. True, many of the great groves are gone, but also because our sense of the whole is supplanted by a view of the single oak as property and commodity.

Think about this description, for instance: “For about twenty miles it could only be compared to a park which had originally been closely planted with the true old English oak; the under wood that had probably attended its early growth had the appearance of having been cleared away and left the stately lords of the forest in complete possession of the soil which was covered in luxuriant foliage” (Vancouver, cited in Pavlik and others 1992). That description, dating from 1796, was of the Santa

Clara Valley, and in the words of British Naval Captain George Vancouver, it was a marvel. We know the area now as Silicon Valley, and changes from one form of use to another were little short of epic. The Dutch geographer Jan Broek, in his 1932 study of the area (Broek 1932), noted the entire Santa Clara Valley was cleared of valley oaks and *Quercus agrifolia* so fruit trees might replace them; in turn those plantings lasted until the 1950s or 1960s, but were then vanquished in favor of pavement, suburbs, and dot-coms.

Figure 5—The Cañizares map, dating from 1776, remains a classic in California; its depiction of the San Francisco Bay Area is recognizable enough, including a small fort at Yerba Buena and a redwood in what is now Palo Alto, but most distinctive are the oaks, evocatively drawn all across the map surface (detail of original, courtesy of The Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California).

About this disappearance of one landscape, the woodland, in favor of another—the urban—there is relatively little written despite the presence, now, of 7 million people, not a few of them quite skilled with words. Yet let me also be quick to point out the vast areas within the San Francisco Bay Area that remain "open space." Much of that is rangeland, or oak woodlands, that encircle the people resident there. Instead, the changeover rated barely a technical mention in the Census of Agriculture, as "rangeland," an impossibly badly-defined feature, became "tree crops," and then disappeared census by census as what John Fraser Hart calls the "perimetropolitan bow wave" wrought its effect (Hart 1991).

The Values Others See in Oaks

What is the intrinsic value of oaks? We haven't really gotten much farther toward resolution, except to point out what hasn't generally been incorporated into the mix. But the aesthetic and nostalgic worth of woodlands isn't anything to minimize. That may sound entirely romantic, but it needn't be. Let me quote, for instance, J. Russell Smith, a professor of geography at the University of Pennsylvania at the turn of the century, who published the very first article, in 1916, in the *Geographical Review,* a journal which, as it happens, I now edit (Smith 1916). In an essay titled "The Oak Tree and Man's Environment," later republished in modified form in an equally classic volume titled *Tree Crops: A Permanent Agriculture,* Smith avers (1987): "If I wanted to be comfortably and permanently rich, I could ask for few more secure bases for it in the line of agricultural lands than the undisturbed possession of a few hundred acres of Portuguese land with a good stand of cork-oak trees (*Quercus suber*) and evergreen-oak trees (*Quercus ilex*). If the stand of trees was good, it would make little difference if the land happened to be rough, untillable hillsides. It would still yield its crops of cork and pork (the pork made of acorns). The virtues of the Portuguese cork forests are quadruple, and the forests are almost perpetual if given a little intelligent care" (Smith 1916, 1987).

He tells of an oak in the Algarve, a grape-growing district of Portugal, also, that yielded 1,200 liters (34 bushels) of acorns; for that matter, yields of a ton of acorns from an oak in the Central Valley of California is not unheard of (Smith 1987). More on point, oak woodland crops in Spain, Portugal, Morocco, France, Greece, and Italy of mast, of wood, of forage, of mushrooms, of corks, of game animals, are anything but unknown. This variegated, quite aged (1800 years, at least), and well-tended Mediterranean landscape is all human—and valued by all (Grove and Rackham 2001). In fact, the European Union's most pronounced effort relating to the Common Agricultural Policy, or CAP, is a move toward what they describe as "low intensity agriculture," in no small measure because of its effectiveness in keeping people on the land, and for its reduction of agricultural waste and overproduction.

Oaks—especially cork oaks—were brought from Portugal and Spain to the United States early on. In fact, Thomas Jefferson made the first known attempt. The Crown Cork and Seal Company and Armstrong Cork later undertook a much more successful effort beginning in the 1880s, and UC Extension Forester Woody Metcalf published on California's cork possibilities in the 1920s and 1930s (Metcalf 1929, 1941). The problem in California turned out not to be climate or fertility, but simply in locating skilled harvesters to strip the cork. Ranchers in California's oak woodlands find many other things to harvest; at least one family ranch the Bay Area makes a respectable income leasing different companies space for cell-phone towers on a hillside facing a busy Interstate highway route in the East Bay *(fig. 6)*. Hunting clubs lease woodlands for habitat; conservation easements can pay off death duties and bring in regular income; carbon sequestration will become a viable income source.

The status and prospects of oaks—here and elsewhere—are insufficiently known, despite huge volumes of work done in the past and ongoing today. That globally there is a blistering diversity of oaks, in different environments, and put to different uses, is beyond dispute. Less agreed upon, though, is their complex history and the variation in the nature of the oak woodland. The literature still develops, and it is voluminous. Because oak landscapes are so varied, and yet so ubiquitous, perhaps their single main shared feature worldwide is a multiplicity of uses. If

individual oaks are cherished, and sometimes known by name, the larger woodlands that they comprise are ecosystems of formidable complexity. Nor are crops even in the California oak woodlands in any necessary way limited. Our current distaste, in the American West, for "exotic" trees is newfound; none of California's 350-plus agricultural crops is, after all, "native."

Figure 6—The two slender vertical poles that lie just below the crest, cellular phone transponders, are worth no small amount to the well-positioned landowner and count as another paying use of woodlands. (Photograph by P. F. Starrs, 2001)

A day will come—it is already a fact in the European Union—when landowners will be paid, as a public good, to regenerate oaks on their lands. And why aren't there payments to graze off fire-susceptible areas in the West *(fig. 7)*? In fact, there is the notorious "Goats-R-Us" in the San Francisco Bay Area, which graze the wooded slopes of Sutro Peak (and significant parts of the East Bay Regional Park District), at a fee of up to $700 per acre—remitted to the "Goat Man." Rarely has being a shepherd—or goat rancher—paid so munificently.

My view here, then, is of an expedition into the gray territory of meaning, where the clouded skies of something we call "values" are best clarified by the judicious application of economic, social, political, policy, and larger analysis. No one knows exactly what "values" are—yet the term, with all its indecisiveness, plagues virtually any form of study of humans and their interactions with the world of resources or nature. It has been so since the 1960s, if not before.

Figure 7—With drought and fire ever a part of the California landscape, the results can be spectacular, as at Mt. Diablo in 1977. An ongoing battle over whether to graze parts of Mt. Diablo or to cease grazing has circled, in part, over the fear of park neighbors that a catastrophic fire on ungrazed parklands could leave them with a tinderbox at hand that could not be controlled. (Photograph by J. J. Parsons 1977)

Conclusions

We continue to devote enormous resources to the oaks of California. Witness this conference, the jobs many of us carry out, and the growing efforts devoted to oaks and their sustenance by government, university, NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), and landowners. Why do we do this? Why "oaks" and "woodlands," rather than riparian forests, natural levees, madroño or mountain misery? Nothing approaching this degree of attention is directed toward native grasses (though we have some), or to vernal pools, or to relict wildlife populations.

I don't find that question an idle one, nor, probably, should any of us. What are we looking for in our oak woodland work? At some point, monies spread around become part of an elaborate redistribution of wealth, to consultants, to education outreach specialists, to scientists and principal investigators, into the coffers of private science firms or into the purview of university Vice Presidents for Research.

But there is more we can do in our attentions to California's oak woodlands and the values that attach to them. I worry that we concentrate on details at the expense of larger results—arguing about the shape of the germ, not the virulence of the disease. Building blocks are fine, but they are NOT a structure, a building, or even a good plan. Beyond "values" need come action and satisfactory results.

All that is known; what is not is how best to value oak woodlands—and California's in particular. Different attempts have been made; what is crucial to the continued well-being of California's oak woodlands is coming up with some scheme that makes valuation credible, shareable, inclusive, and understandable. We welcome those incoming details. It is time for us to take this knowledge and from that not just ask, but also answer the question: What will California's oak woodlands become?

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