

Redwoods—Responsibilities for a Long-Lived Species/Resource¹

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Abstract

What responsibilities do humans have to ensure that redwoods survive? And what values and strategies are required to accomplish such a purpose? A basic assumption is that the saving of a species, or more broadly of an ecosystem, is ultimately about human survival and that there is a responsibility to use all tools available to this end. To date, our actions to sustain redwoods include setting aside acreage in parks and reserves, sustainably harvesting redwoods for commercial use, and educating ourselves and the public on the benefits and services of the redwood forest. These are current approaches for managing the remaining narrow strip of coastal redwoods running from Monterey to Del Norte Counties in Northern California. Fossil evidence indicates that redwoods have been around for at least 130 million years and once had a distribution across much of the Northern Hemisphere. The historic redwood range was reduced through natural causes such as climate changes, glaciation, and volcanic eruptions. More contemporary disruptions have come from extensive market-driven logging in the early to mid-20th century, the recent conversion of private forestland from primarily a timber to primarily a financial asset, and temperature and precipitation variability due to climate change. Are current strategies adequate to enable the long-term viability of the species? And what if they aren't? As natural and human influences become increasingly intermingled, the redwood community is challenged to think creatively about solutions. The growing consensus on best practices for managing redwood properties—for commercial uses and protection—and for more science to improve these practices is encouraging. Next steps include more effective anticipation of outside threats to redwood viability and a pilot to set reestablishment of redwoods across their prior range in California and beyond. A final hurdle is to fully embrace the long time horizon and flexible outlook required to meet our responsibilities for sustaining coastal redwoods.

Keywords: Redwood conservation, redwood forest policy

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Coast Redwood Science Symposium, September 13-15, 2016, Eureka, California.

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