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## The Eucalyptus: Sacred or profane?

**By Ted Williams**

High Country News, February 2002

**Only God can make a tree**, but any ecological illiterate can plant it in the wrong place.

Ansel Adams understood this. On running tree-planting Boy Scouts out of California's Marin Headlands, the photographer declared: "I cannot think of a more tasteless undertaking than to plant trees in a naturally treeless area, and to impose an interpretation of natural beauty on a great landscape that is charged with beauty and wonder and the excellence of eternity."

In Australia, "excellence of eternity" includes eucalyptus, which has fueled recent fires. Eucs depend on fire, promote fire, support complex, fire-dependent ecosystems. Koalas eat euc leaves; the "old gum tree" that kookaburra sat on in the song was a eucalyptus. These trees are beautiful and precious. In Australia.

In California, they are our largest and most dangerous weed. Eucalyptus, impregnated with flammable oil, don't just burn; they explode, spewing firebrands hundreds of feet. Long, peeling bark is designed to carry flames to crowns. Most everything dies except the euc, whose seed pods open with the heat. And if these trees don't burn out the competition, they may poison it out with their toxic drippings.

Yet town and county ordinances protect these aliens. In Santa Cruz, even a juvenile euc is a "heritage tree," and if you cut yours without a permit (tough to get), the fine is \$500. When poet Robert Sward hired a crew to trim his eucalyptus, the "euc police" from the Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department appeared and chased the men off the roof. Living next to a eucalyptus, says Sward, is "like keeping uncovered barrels of gasoline in your garage."

In Bolinas, just north of San Francisco, eucs are creating extreme fire hazards. But when the town tried to remove a stand, euc-huggers killed the project. It would be "clear-cutting," they proclaimed, "genocide," "ethnic cleansing," "terrorism." It would cause "global warming." The town fathers were "plant Nazis." The impenetrable, toxic monoculture was an "old-growth forest," a "cathedral," a "sacred grove."

At hearings, they dispensed eucalyptus cough drops, chanted, "Save our eucalyptus." They convinced Marin County regulators that monarch butterflies, which sometimes winter on eucs, depend on them. Now, if Bolinas residents want to cut their eucalyptus, they have to check with the county to see if they need to apply for a permit. Applications cost \$1,400.

The notion that monarchs depend on eucalyptus—gospel in California—raises an interesting question: How did the insects survive before 1853, the year the trees were unleashed in North America? Basically, monarchs roost on eucs for the same reason they roost on Ferris wheels - because they are there. When they weren't there, monarchs probably migrated down the coast to safer climes. Geoff Geupel of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory believes that eucs may create "monarch sinks"—that is, monarchs are attracted to them, then get blown out by storms, perishing en masse.

Observatory data show that eucalyptus do create bird sinks. For example, 50 percent of the Anna's hummingbird nests are shaken out of the trees by wind compared with 10 percent for native vegetation. Insectivorous North American birds attracted to euc blossoms haven't evolved the long beaks of their Australian counterparts and therefore can't deal with the sticky gum. Frequently, it kills them by clogging their faces and nostrils. Wherever eucalyptus replaces native vegetation, bird-species diversity drops by at least 70 percent. And eucs provide nesting habitat for great horned owls,

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predators that don't belong in lots of coastal settings and that take a heavy toll of troubled species that do belong, such as barn owls and northern spotted owls.

The "wonder trees," as they were called, were going to provide timber for ships, houses and railroad ties. Their oil was going to relieve insomnia, cystitis, pain, irritation, venereal disease, bladder infections, malaria, diphtheria, dysentery, typhoid and the "fetid smell of gangrenous limbs." But the lumber was weak and brittle; the elixirs didn't work.

One of the better indications of what we've learned in 149 years was provided Jan. 2 by Carolyn Blair, director of the San Francisco Tree Council, an organization that calls city-sponsored habitat restoration via euc removal "unnecessary destruction of non-native, healthy trees... simply to make way for native plants." Replying to a note from my friend Cindy, a native-ecosystem activist, Blair demanded: "If native trees were so great, why didn't they plant them back in 1870?"

Cindy says those words remind her of Lucy Van Pelt's immortal question to piano player Schroeder about why, if Beethoven was so great, he wasn't on bubble gum cards.

*Naturalist and writer Ted Williams is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News.*