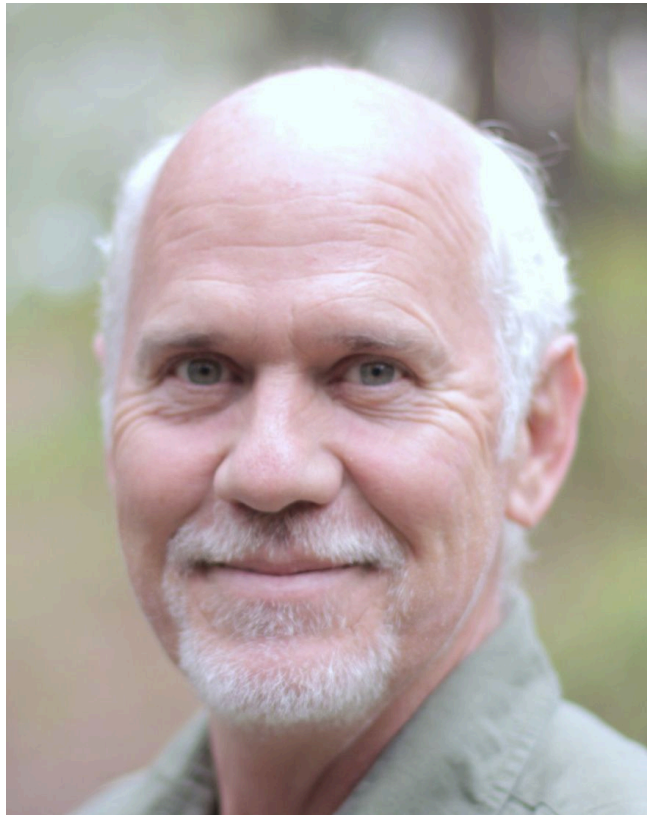

View from the Left: Who Speaks for the Trees?

December 27, 2022



“I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees for the trees have no tongues.”

The Lorax is a Dr. Seuss story about a brave character who tried to stop the clear cutting of rare Truffula trees. Spoiler alert! He failed.

In Del Norte County who speaks for the trees?

Recently, local residents were surprised to learn through the grapevine that some old growth redwood trees in Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park had been cut down along Highway 199.

It began as a buzz on Facebook. There were photos of large redwood tree stumps, including a tree hugger whose arms outstretched on a fallen redwood only reached halfway across the diameter.

The Friends of Del Norte started asking questions and raising concerns.

Eventually, there was a story published by the Wild Rivers Outpost (12/16/22) that provided more clues to this tree murder mystery.

The people demanded an explanation.

“Those trees had it coming,” Caltrans responded, “They might have killed someone, some day.”

Just kidding. After the fact, Caltrans explained that these redwoods were cut to improve road safety. It is a reasonable premise. Trees or limbs will inevitably fall during winter storms. There is an undeniable risk.

As we saw last year, it is possible that a redwood tree can fall on a passing car. While this was a tragic accident, it is also a very rare occurrence. We should not overreact.

IF it is a rational conclusion that some of the trees near the road should be cut down in the interest of safety, then it is a logical extension of this strategy that it would be better to cut down more.

This is what people are concerned about.

Before a government agency makes a discretionary decision to irrevocably remove redwood trees, there should at least be an opportunity to have questions answered.

How many old growth redwoods were cut? What criteria were used to determine which trees to cut? Were proper procedures followed to ensure compliance with state and federal environmental laws? Who spoke for the trees?

The problem is not with the justification for this action, but with the execution of the plan without clear prior notice or public involvement with the decision-making. The public notices vaguely stated that Highway 199 would be closed for “winterization” or “tree work.”

Caltrans may have the right or obligation in an emergency to remove trees without any public process. However, it behooves responsible government agencies to embrace transparent processes whenever possible to gain long term trust with the public. When there is a lack of official information the void is filled with speculation.

I understand why some people will fight hard to save every tree in the remaining stands of old growth redwoods. Redwood trees have grown in our region for millions of years, but ninety five percent of the original old growth redwoods have been cut since redwood logging began.

Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park contains a significant portion of what is left of the old growth redwoods. They are specifically charged with stewardship of these redwoods. Did they speak for the trees?

Allowing only a few redwoods to be cut here and there could be like a death by a thousand cuts, literally. Over time the remaining stands of old growth redwood may disappear without vigilant preservation efforts.

There are several committed conservation groups worth mentioning who have been strong defenders of our redwood forests. They boldly speak for the trees.

The Save the Redwoods League has worked for 100 years to protect coast redwoods and giant sequoia forests. The Friends of Del Norte has a long history of success safeguarding our environment in Del Norte

County.

The Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC) never shies away from holding government agencies accountable. I am glad to see they have intervened in the local Caltrans red-wood tree removal case.

The Lost Coast Outpost story quotes Tom Wheeler, the Executive Director and attorney for EPIC who criticized the “dark-of-night” project.

“I would like to have it be a transparent project that has avenues for public participation, that has a formal impact analysis and that has appropriate mitigation and minimization measures.

These are highly important trees culturally and ecologically and this project is kind of unfortunate.”

An Action Alert on the EPIC website (wildcalifornia.org) is asking people to “send an email to Caltrans District 1 Director Matthew Brady urging the agency to stop logging old growth red-woods in state parks and use a better process for the identification of potential hazard trees with special consideration for trees, like old-growth redwoods, which are irreplaceable.”

My hope is that when these government agencies get some feedback that they will take time to reflect and analyze how this project went sideways with the public that they serve. More importantly, they should consider how similar discretionary actions will be managed better in the future.

“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” The Lorax

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