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FEATURED

Having faith in the forest

Quarry Park work creates stronger forest

By Grace Scullion

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Logs from recently cut Eucalyptus trees for fire mitigation sit along a hillside near homes in El Granada in Half Moon Bay on August 11, 2022. Adam Pardee / Review

Adam Pardee

Chainsaws roar in the eucalyptus groves of Quarry Park as trees are felled and reduced to wood chips. It is not some conservationist nightmare; it's actually a forest in repair.

A three-year fuel-reduction project is creating 49 acres of shaded fuel breaks and removing hazardous trees along 100 acres of fire roads in Quarry Park. The goal is to reduce the risk of a dangerous and fast-spreading fire and make fire roads safer in the event of wildfire. The

three-year project began last summer and is funded by a \$1.2 million grant from the Coastal Conservancy.



A trail that has not yet been cleared for fire mitigation is overgrown in El Granada. Adam Pardee / Review

A crew of five to eight people works daily to cut down the smaller eucalyptus and trees identified as at risk of falling. Prior to the clearing work, the San Mateo Resource Conservation District conducted surveys of frogs, birds, bats and other wildlife. Biologists are on site twice a week on the lookout for nesting birds. If one is spotted, its section of the forest is protected and the work crew must wait.

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As the eucalyptus grove is thinned, native species will return to the park. Slowly but surely, the dense grove of Tasmanian blue gum eucalyptus will be replaced by a diverse landscape of native sticky monkey flower, coffee berry, elderberry and oak, among other plants.

At first glance, the fire mitigation efforts may disturb park regulars: thick groves of the giants reduced to piles of wood chips with a few sparse trees left behind.



Signs posted along trails in Quarry Park alerting hikers and visitors about the fire mitigation taking place in Half Moon Bay on August 11, 2022. Adam Pardee / Review

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“The way it appears right now is a lot more stark and barren than the long-term look this forest will have,” said Hannah Ormshaw, assistant director of San Mateo County Parks. “It really doesn’t take very long for things to sprout back, for you to see greenery in the understory again.”

Within a few months, native plants will sprout in the cleared out areas. Without competition from the water-sucking eucalyptus and with extra sunlight coming through the thinned canopy, they should find great success, according to Ormshaw. By next year, she predicts that the current barren hills will be entirely covered with young native plants.

This vision of the future can be seen in other parts of the park, where fuel reduction projects were conducted over a decade ago. The landscapes with native plants are marked by a diverse array of bushes and shrubs and few eucalyptus trees.



Crews work to clear the Eucalyptus trees along a fire road for fire mitigation in Quarry Park in Half Moon Bay on August 11, 2022. Adam Pardee / Review

Adam Pardee

Projects like this one aim to restore the “natural cycle of disturbance, succession and regeneration,” said Ormshaw. An untouched forest faces mortality caused by fire, drought, flooding or pests regularly.

“We haven’t allowed these systems to be dynamic, so now we have to go in and manage it to be more resilient,” said Ormshaw. Though this first management effort is expensive, difficult and labor-intensive, “the type of maintenance that we’ll conduct long term isn’t always going to be this drastic. We’ll be able to take a lighter touch when we return.”

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Ongoing maintenance will attempt to keep the aggressive eucalyptus from re-seeding and allow the proliferation of native species.

Mid-19th century, eucalyptus trees were “promoted as a get-rich-quick scheme,” explained Erica Harris, a conservation project manager with the San Mateo Resource Conservation District. Brought to California from Australia, settlers planted the fast-growing, hardy trees everywhere.



This aerial shot shows the dramatic change in the landscape as crews create fire breaks at Quarry Park. Photo courtesy San Mateo County Parks.

“It didn’t really work out. The wood is not actually marketable — you have to pay to get rid of it,” said Harris. Eucalyptus is a lousy fuel source and building material, it turns out. The felled trees at Quarry Park are being chipped on site and used as ground cover.

Removing a large eucalyptus tree can cost anywhere from \$500 to \$10,000, according to Harris. Which is why, even armed with over \$1 million, the RCD can only tackle a quarter of the 400-acre grove at Quarry Park.

The forest management crew will continue thinning groves in Quarry Park through November, then pause for the rainy season. They will hopefully finish the project next summer.

“You have to crack a few eggs before you make an omelet,” said Ormshaw. “It’s going to look stark, it’s going to look different initially, and then nature takes its course.”

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