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# RCD argues for removal of eucalyptus in Pacifica

Familiar issues north of tunnel

By Adrian Jose Fernandez  
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***Eucalyptus trees sway on the hillside*** behind Ace Hardware in Pedro Point on Aug. 31. Fire officials and other conservationists worry that the non-native trees represent a fire hazard in Pacifica and elsewhere on the coast.

Anna Hoch-Kenney / Review

There is currently a countywide push to remove eucalyptus trees from coastal areas, including Pacifica's own Pedro Point, where eucalyptus tower above the Ace Hardware plant nursery. It's an effort to lessen the risk of wildfire and remove an invasive species that is increasingly seen as problematic on the coast.

This might seem strange to locals, some of whom grew up appreciating Pacifica's tiny forest. While not a single living resident of Pacifica can remember a time before the sweet-smelling eucalyptus covered the mountain above Pedro Point, the hilly terrain was once without the canopy of trees.

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The mountain that would later be known as Pedro Point was originally covered only by the shrubs, bushes and grasses that still populate the adjacent Montara Mountain and its treeless ridges. In fact, the Australian eucalyptus tree was brought over to the Americas during the mid-1800s, coinciding with the local Sanchez Adobe's construction.

Initially, these trees were planned for timber, but the public soon came to enjoyed the natural beauty they provided to the landscape. This would prove a turning point for the area, which would see heavy planting efforts throughout the 1900s as the artichoke farms turned into residential tract homes.

Many Linda Mar residents have appreciated the beauty of the eucalyptus forest behind the Ace Hardware in Pedro Point. Visible from just about anywhere in the

valley, the forest seems as much a part of Pacifica as the fog that rolls lazily over the eucalyptus canopy in the afternoon. The only problem is that the non-native trees do not coexist with the local environment as successfully as some might hope.

At the most recent Pacifica City Council meeting, Kellyx Nelson, executive director of the San Mateo Resource Conservation District, spoke about the organization's efforts to restore the ecological health of Pacifica.

Nelson said the organization works to "help people help the land" and is committed to working to reduce emissions, maintain forest health and fire resiliency, as well as take care of local wildlife and ensure clean water.

In that context, Mayor Tygarjas Bigstych mentioned the removal of eucalyptus trees toward the south end of Pacifica. "As you drive south towards the tunnel, there is that corridor that, on the one hand, is magical to drive through, and then on the other hand is also a crisis waiting to happen if it goes up in flames," he said.

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"I feel the same conflict," said Nelson. "They smell so good ... while there is something kind of magical about (the forest), they are invasive exotic species that are highly flammable and are right next to a roadway, which maybe people would use as egress if there was a fire," she said.

"They damage soil health and accelerate erosion, suck up a lot of water, impair biodiversity and disrupt ecological function," she said. "They are a scourge, even if

they are pretty.”

When members of the council asked if trees would be planted in place of the removed eucalyptus, Nelson said that in this case planting nothing would be best, as the hills around Pacifica are naturally home to grass and shrubs, without any forests to speak of.

Nelson explained that while many municipal tree ordinances dictate that new trees must be planted when others are cut down, this is not always the best option from an ecological point of view. According to Nelson, the San Pedro Mountain was originally “coastal scrub habitat or grassland habitat. In fact, the San Francisco coastal garter snake, which is critically endangered and endemic to this area ... (is threatened) by encroachment of forests into grasslands.

“It doesn’t always make sense to replace one tree with another,” she said.

“Sometimes there are other habitats that are really valuable if ecological restoration is your goal.”

Not everybody in Pacifica shares Nelson’s viewpoint, however.

“While we agree that homeowners should have defensible space from fire, in general we think that more trees are better than fewer trees,” said Paul Totah from Tree City Pacifica.

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“The City of Pacifica supports replanting climate-appropriate trees when trees are removed,” he wrote in an email. “Trees combat climate change by sequestering carbon, so it makes sense to replant trees in our ongoing battle with climate change.”

Totah went on to mention the discontent felt by citizens of nearby El Granada when the county “cut down eucalyptus in the medians and did not replant trees.

“The citizens are extremely unhappy about this and

continue to advocate for replanting trees in the area,” he said.