

Should we hide the locations of Earth's greatest trees?

By Robert Earle Howells | Thursday, July 5, 2018



Photo: Drew Hyland | Writer Robert Earle Howells stops during a hike through the Tall Trees Grove in Redwood National Park en route to the Hyperion tree.

The crown of Hyperion, a roughly 600-year-old coast redwood tree, rises more than 379 feet from its base on a steep slope in a remote part of Redwood National Park, just north of Eureka in Humboldt County. It's the tallest tree on earth, and I was determined to go see it.

My motives were pure, or so I thought. I've been drawn to the majesty of coast redwoods since Dad first loaded us into the family station wagon for a camping trip to Richardson Grove State Park, also in Humboldt County, way back when.

As a native of San Luis Obispo County, my notion of great trees consisted of gnarled coast live oaks crowning golden-grassed hills. These redwoods...oh, my. They soared so tall and straight into the fog-

drenched air, so crazily oversized, so full of quiet majesty — I was blown away. Their silence strikes me as much as their height and girth. Their thick bark and tall straight trunks — branchless for the first 150 to 200 feet — function like massive acoustic baffles, aided by a sound-damping carpet of dense duff. John Steinbeck called the effect a “cathedral hush.”

So why not pay homage to their king tree, the giant of giants, Hyperion, named for one of the Titans of Greek mythology?

Well, it’s not that simple.

The National Park Service doesn’t want anyone to know where Hyperion is, let alone hike to see it. Rangers don’t even refer to the tree by name. Environmental advocates and most lovers of big trees won’t help you either. Everyone who knows about the tree seems to keep Hyperion’s precise location a closely guarded secret.

And for good reason. I didn’t realize it, but I was embarking on a growing brand of trophy hunting in nature that, fueled by social media, has spawned an out-of-proportion mania for touching, seeing and posting images of special places — usually to the detriment of those places.

For example, a scenic viewpoint called Horseshoe Bend on the Colorado River in northern Arizona, shared on Instagram in hundreds of thousands of photos, is perpetually crowded. It receives so many daily visitors — 10 times the visitation of nearby overlooks, according to one report — that local police and the Park Service have imposed parking restrictions nearby.

Visitors are asked not to linger, and police officers now stationed in the parking area hurry people along. How’s that for enjoying nature?

Another social media darling, a swimming hole called Three Pools in Oregon’s Santiam River, is constantly overrun with visitors. As a result, Willamette National Forest has imposed parking fees, limited the number of cars allowed, and banned alcohol use at the pools, while local police have stepped up patrols in the area.

But trees, unlike swimming holes or scenic canyon ledges, are living things. At a time when our national parks are receiving record numbers of visitors, and authorities are weighing all sorts of options for limiting access and minimizing crowding in ecologically sensitive areas, it’s worth wondering whether some of these one-of-a-kind trees should just be left alone. A first step toward discouraging trophy hunting might be to drop the practice of naming trees in the first place.

When researchers and tree hunters discover new tall trees, they not only measure them, they inevitably bestow them with names - oftentimes legendary ones. Who isn’t going to be curious about trees called Lost Monarch, Methuselah, or Aragorn?

When prominent tree researcher Steve Sillett, a professor at Humboldt State University, and big-tree hunter Michael Taylor came upon an extraordinary stand of massive trees in Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park in 1998, they christened it Grove of Titans, and issued the trees iconic monikers. The discovery remained relatively quiet until it was depicted in a 2006 book by Richard Preston called *The Wild Trees*. Preston didn’t reveal the grove’s exact location, but the book spurred interest and prompted

amateur tree hunters to seek it out. In 2010, a blogger posted the grove's location and set off something of a giant-tree rush.

"There's a huge downside when people try to find these particular trees that you really can't tell [apart] from other trees," says Greg Litten, an interpretive specialist and ranger at Redwood National Park.

Most immediate is damage from social trailing, meaning the creation of informal footpaths that inevitably occurs where no official trail exists. Social trails not only damage the understory, they impact the surprisingly shallow roots of redwood trees. Besides the obvious woody roots, many fine roots are hidden in the duff of the forest floor. When we create informal trails, we eliminate a protective layer for those fine roots, which are critical to the health of redwood trees.



Photo: Associated Press

California's Redwood National Park comprises 58,000 acres.

"The Grove of Titans is a classic example of that," Litten adds. "We can look at photos of the grove from the 1990s and today, after social media. We see human detritus and trampled vegetation." People have even cut vegetation to get the photo angles they want, says park ranger Mike Poole.

Another ranger, Brett Silver, put it more bluntly: "It's supposed to look like virgin forest passed down from prehistory," he told the Statesman Journal newspaper last year. "But instead, it's starting to look like the Los Angeles freeway system."

Nearby Stout Tree has been similarly degraded. "When I started hiking the redwoods 15 years ago, there was no visible track leading [there]," says David Baselt, who runs a trail guide website called Redwood Hikes. "Now, every visitor automatically goes off-trail to take their picture standing next to the tree." In the process, visitors have almost completely worn away the bark from the tree's base.

Not all of these issues can be ascribed to the naming of these unique trees, but it's noteworthy that Redwood National Park has never officially engaged in the practice. "We never name the trees," Poole says. "By not naming a tree, you stand a chance of saving it."



Photo: Associated Press

This aerial view of the southern end of Redwood National Park on California's North Coast.

In the last decade or so, rangers at the park have stopped referring to unique trees by the names given to them by researchers, save for a couple of historic trees in local state parks. Even Sillett, who first measured the height of Hyperion and has discovered and named redwoods, now regrets the practice.

“Publicizing names of champion trees is a mistake because it makes them targets of visitation,” Sillett says. “Publicizing tree locations is an even bigger mistake, and folks who do this often choose to remain anonymous, because they know it is wrong.”

Yosemite National Park, which recently completed a massive restoration project at its Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias (which have cool names like Grizzly Giant and The Bachelor), has stopped naming trees as well.

“It’s a culture shift in parks and conservation that began in the ’70s and ’80s,” says Yosemite public affairs officer Jamie Richards. “We used to cut holes through trees and stage bear-feeding shows. In those days, we wanted to create attractions that people would want to come look at. Today, we will retain the historic names for the trees in Mariposa Grove, but we think all giant sequoias are magnificent and special. We want people to enjoy the majesty of all the trees.”

A similar policy has worked well for a famous tree known as Methuselah — a bristlecone pine in the White Mountains of eastern California that was once thought to be the world’s oldest living thing. (It’s now considered the second- or third-oldest.) The 4,800-year-old tree stands in a grove in Inyo National Forest, but exactly which tree it is, is kept secret by those in the know; the Forest Service website for the forest doesn’t even mention Methuselah’s name. It’s a protective measure against over-enthusiastic nature lovers who might carve off a piece of the ancient tree for themselves.

In national parks, keeping people at bay increasingly means installing boardwalks, railings, and viewing platforms, like those that tightly guide visitors through Muir Woods National Monument. Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park recently built a wide trail to Stout Tree and a viewing platform around it, which “has rather severely affected what used to be a remarkably undeveloped grove,” Baselt says. Grove of

the Titans is slated to receive similar treatment, once funding is raised for a boardwalk trail and viewing platforms. For better or worse, these once-wild places are being rendered virtual zoos for trees.

Hyperion has, for the most part, been spared the burdens that have plagued other trophy trees and places.

Its existence has been well known for more than a decade, ever since it was discovered by Taylor and fellow tree hunter Chris Atkins. National Geographic documented Stillett's first climb of Hyperion in 2006, when the researcher measured the tree as 379.1 feet tall. Even so, its precise location has remained a secret (although one website has published its purported coordinates). **The Park Service and Save the Redwoods League, a San Francisco nonprofit devoted to protecting and restoring redwoods, scarcely acknowledge the tree's existence.**

But after reading so much about Hyperion and the hunt for the world's tallest trees, I was moved to go see it.

Last fall, I beseeched a friend — a Humboldt County local who had been to Hyperion before — to guide me. We made the two-mile hike to Redwood National Park's Tall Trees Grove, then proceeded on the challenging off-trail trek to the tree.

We crossed a creek and proceeded up a very steep, slick slope. My eyes were fixed downward, monitoring my foot placement, when my friend told me to stop and look up. "That's it - tallest tree in the world," he said. There's no way I would have known. I couldn't even see its crown from the ground.

Neighboring trees were just as stately. But I did feel quiet sense of humility, and spent a few minutes in silence to honor the tree. I took a few photos — and no, I didn't put any on Instagram. I noticed the early evidence of a social trail between that nearby creek and the tree, plus someone had arranged a small shrine near its base. No doubt the person meant well, but it sullied the wildness of the place. I stepped lightly and like to think that I left no trace, but, well, I was there.



Photo: Max Forster / Save The Redwoods League
Redwoods in Humboldt Redwoods State Park.



Photo: Max Forster / Save The Redwoods League
Redwoods in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park.

Would I do it again? No. At the time, reaching Hyperion seemed like a way to earn bragging rights, but I've regretted hiking to the tree since I left.

My visit preceded my reporting for this story. Everything that the park rangers and Save the Redwoods League told me rings true.

Redwood trees are giant collective spirits — ecosystems, in the scientific parlance. Why single out one, when the collective has such profound presence and significance? It's how those trees interact with one another and with their understory that enables them to reach such magnificent heights. That's the source of their majesty. Not a cool name or a world record.

I was much more moved by Tall Trees Grove. The mile-long loop through that collection of giants felt hallowed, exemplary of Steinbeck's cathedral hush. I also wandered down to Redwood Creek and looked back up at the grove's incredible dark skyline of unnamed trees, their crowns soaring above 300 feet. Those are the enduring feelings and images from that day.

I would encourage anyone to make the Tall Trees hike, and discourage anyone from attempting to reach Hyperion. Some locations, some trees, should remain secret, untrammled, and probably unnamed. Let them flourish in anonymous silence. Let us look out from afar and be happy that they're there, and proud that 50 years ago we established a national park to protect them.

“I guarantee that when you look up in a redwood grove, nobody can tell the difference between a 300-, a 350-, or a 380-foot tree,” Litten says.

When visitors ask where to find Hyperion, what does he tell them?

“I tell them I’ve never seen it. I’ve never sought it out,” Litten says. “I tell them to go to Redwood Creek Overlook and look off into the distance. They’ll be gazing upon it.” Hyperion is out there somewhere, alongside thousands of soaring redwood giants.

Robert Earle Howells writes about national parks and is a contributing author of National Geographic's Secrets of the National Parks. Email: Travel@sfchronicle.com.

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