

The Mercury News

New California redwood park larger than Muir Woods created on Sonoma Coast



Forester Todd McMahon walks in a meadow among the largest privately-held stand of old-growth redwoods in the world, north of Cazadero on April 17, 2018. Save-the-Redwoods League is completing an \$18.1 million deal to buy 730 acres of land that has been in the Richardson family for generations. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

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By Paul Rogers, Bay Area News Group | 06/26/18

STEWARTS POINT — For more than a century, Muir Woods National Monument in Marin County has been one of Northern California's main tourist attractions, with towering old-growth redwood trees that draw more than 1 million visitors a year.

But now, there will soon be a new destination to admire the majestic trees. In the largest deal to protect old-growth redwood trees anywhere in California in 20 years, a Bay Area environmental group has purchased a remote 730-acre ancient forest on the Sonoma Coast for a new public park west of Santa Rosa. Not only is it larger than Muir Woods, the property boasts more old-growth redwoods, 319 trees taller than 250 feet, including many that are taller than the 305-foot-high Statue of Liberty, and dating back more than 1,000 years.

“It’s a remarkable place,” said Sam Hodder, president of the San Francisco-based Save the Redwoods League, which purchased the property, blessed with babbling streams and giant ferns, inland from Highway 1 between Jenner and Sea Ranch. “It’s like getting another Muir Woods.”

The property was the largest unprotected old-growth redwood forest left in private ownership in the United States. It is known now as the Harold Richardson Redwoods Reserve, after a 96-year-old logger who owned the land but refused for generations to cut down the massive, primeval trees.

Richardson died in 2016. The \$18.1 million deal with Save the Redwoods League was set to be announced Tuesday. The new park will be operated by the league and open to hikers for free in about three years, after the organization finishes environmental surveys of the property and builds hiking trails.

Under the deal, Save the Redwoods League is paying \$9.6 million to the Richardson family, a Sonoma County fixture since the 1870s, and also transferring to them a nearby 870-acre parcel the league owned known as Stewarts Point Ranch.

Money to fund the acquisition came from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, in Palo Alto, along with the Mattson Family Conservation Foundation and other private donors.

Harold Richardson could have logged the massive trees in the 1950s and 1960s, when many of his neighbors were doing the same thing, said Dan Falk, general manager of the Richardson Ranch, a nearby area of about 8,000 acres of second-growth redwood forest and cattle grazing pastures.

“He never would call himself an environmentalist,” Falk said. “He had choice words for the Sierra Club. He was just out there doing a good job, being a good steward of the land. He wanted to pass it on to the future. That’s what he expected the rest of us to do.”



Forester Todd McMahon walks in a meadow among the largest privately-held stand of old-growth redwoods in the world, north of Cazadero on April 17, 2018. Save-the-Redwoods League is completing an \$18.1 million deal to buy 730 acres of land that has been in the Richardson family for generations. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

‘CARE OF THE LAND’

Richardson, who was Falk's great uncle, was a logger who selectively cut younger redwood and Douglas Fir trees, and dead and dying trees, leaving the ancient old-growth redwoods.

"He lived in the same house for over 90 years," Falk said. "He was raised taking care of the land and being a logger. He was very conservative in what he did. He was never a greedy man. He always believed in only taking what you needed from the forest. He didn't believe in cutting down the entire stand of timber just to buy something else."

The tallest known redwood tree on the newly acquired property is 322 feet. The tallest at Muir Woods is 258 feet. The tallest coast redwood anywhere in the world is 380 feet, a tree named Hyperion, in a remote corner of Redwood National Park in the far northern reaches of California.

Harold Richardson flew over Sonoma County several times in small planes decades ago and was saddened to see large clear cuts of ancient redwood forests, Falk said.

"He saw the devastation right up to his property," he said. "There was no erosion control. He didn't like it. He said that wasn't the way he was going to manage his property."

When Richardson, a World War II veteran, died two years ago, the obituary his family submitted to the Santa Rosa Press Democrat said, "he is survived by his old growth forest," first and afterward listed his surviving family members.

"He never wore fancy clothes. He always wore shirts that he seemed to have for 30 years," Falk remembered. "He had the same pickup. He lived a simple life. He was a good man. But he was tough. He wasn't afraid to tell you what he thought. I learned a lot from him."

The deal is the second major acquisition that the league, founded in 1918, has completed in recent months. In May, the organization spent \$3.3 million for 160 acres of giant sequoias in the southern Sierra Nevada — the second-largest grove of giant sequoia trees in private ownership in the world.

Those trees, some more than 250 feet tall and 1,500 years old, are located in an area known as the Red Hill property in a remote, mountainous part of Tulare County adjacent to Giant Sequoia National Monument.



A young redwood tree grows among century-old trees in the forest north of Cazadero on April 17, 2018. The Save-the-Redwoods League is completing an \$18.1 million deal to buy 730 acres of land from the Richardson family in Sonoma County, believed to be the largest privately-held old growth forest in the world. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

FIRST PARK SINCE 1999

This week's Sonoma County deal creates the first new old-growth redwood park in California since 1999, when the state and federal government paid \$380 million to Texas financier Charles Hurwitz to buy 7,472 acres at Headwaters Forest in Humboldt County. That property, of which about 40 percent is old-growth redwoods and the rest previously logged forest, gained international fame after environmental activists, led by Julia Butterfly Hill, camped in the branches of ancient redwoods and chained themselves to the trees to stop loggers from cutting them down.

After a sale was negotiated by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, the Headwaters property is today owned by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and is open to the public.

By contrast, the Richardson property was quietly preserved without similar drama.

"It is a forest of ancient trees," said Hodder. "When you are in it, it feels like it goes on forever. It is very rugged. There are high ridge lines and open pastures, and streams and waterfalls, with redwoods clinging to ravines and steep slopes. You have a sense of being in an oasis that has been inaccessible for generations but that has been hidden in plain sight."



Forester Todd McMahon stands next to towering redwood trees growing on the largest privately-held stand of old-growth redwoods in the world, north of Cazadero on April 17, 2018. Save-the-Redwoods League is completing an \$18.1 million deal to buy 730 acres of land that has been in the Richardson family for generations. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

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