

Life in the Valley

New trail planned for redwood ‘Grove of Titans’

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Hikers in northwest California will finally be able to enjoy a grove of the world’s largest trees without destroying the surrounding forest.

Twenty years after it was discovered, and a decade since people began trampling it, park officials announced plans Wednesday for a new trail system into the mythic Grove of Titans.

The \$3.5 million project includes a re-routed trail system, elevated walkway and rehabilitation in the backcountry of Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park, just south of the Oregon-California state line.

Officials hope to break ground on the project in 2019 and complete it by 2021. Two nonprofit groups, Save the Redwoods League and Redwood Parks Conservancy, are raising the funds.

“We feel confident that this is the best way of giving people a chance to see the Titans and take pictures, while at the same time protecting the trees,” said Brett Silver, acting sector superintendent for California State Parks.

The Grove of Titans is home to some of the world’s largest redwoods, with trees 320 feet tall and 26 feet in diameter. They’re not the tallest, they’re just massive — a grove of “General Sherman” style trees of uncommon height and girth.

They were discovered in 1998 by redwood botanist Steve Sillett and big-tree hunter Michael Taylor, whose adventures were chronicled in the 2007 book “The Wild Trees” by Richard Preston.

The book keeps the grove’s location secret. But the allure of finding trees with names such as Lost Monarch and the Screaming Titans soon inspired websites devoted to showcasing the giants and hinting at their location.

As online information made locating the Titans easier, the number of people seeking them began to rise, and then it skyrocketed.

The result: The trees’ root systems were laid bare by user-created trails that damage the way redwoods take in oxygen and nutrients, biologists said. Parks officials say the damage is akin to carving seven basketball courts in the middle of the forest.

“It’s supposed to look like virgin forest passed down from prehistory, but instead, it’s starting to look like the Los Angeles freeway system,” Silver told the Statesman Journal in 2017.

Even Sillett, who discovered and named the grove, said he regretted publicizing it.

“I never released the location myself, but it was probably a mistake to popularize it. In hindsight, I wouldn’t have even talked about it” for the book, Sillett told the Statesman Journal. “It’s a mistake to popularize trees unless they have some protection in place.”

The hope is that the new trail system, at long last, will provide that protection.

Plans for new trail system laid out

Officials hope to break ground on the multifaceted project by September of 2019.

One phase of the project will reroute Mill Creek Trail, the pathway that goes closest to the grove.

“Mill Creek Trail was already in pretty rough shape, and since we’re expecting a lot more people, it made sense to reroute and fix up the entire thing at once,” Silver said. “The new route will provide access to most of the Titans.”

The section of trail that enters the Titans will be on an elevated metal walkway designed to keep people off the redwood roots and flora.

Park officials plan to “revegetate and rehabilitate” the forest surrounding the Titans that’s been heavily damaged by people tromping among the trees.

The new trail will have signs explaining the grove’s history and why it’s important to stay on the trail. They’ll also install new pit toilets at nearby trailheads.

A final step will involve a long-term study that looks at Howland Hills Road. The gravel road travels through the heart of the redwood park and leads to the most popular hikes. But it was built in the 1950s and isn’t equipped for the growing traffic, Silver said.

“In a lot of ways, we’re looking at what we want Jed Smith to look like in the future,” Silver said. “Does that mean a shuttle system to the trailheads or a fee system for the road? That’s what



Inside the Grove of Titans at northwest California’s Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park.

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we’re going to look at.”

The money to pay for it

The project’s funding will come entirely from donations raised by two groups: Save the Redwoods League and the Redwood Parks Conservancy.

Save the Redwoods bought and protected California’s redwood state parks more than 100 years ago. The vast majority of the redwood forests have been logged, with the last 5 percent of old-growth forest protected in that patchwork of parks.

For this project, the groups are off to a good start.

San Francisco artist Josie Merck will match all donations up to \$500,000, which could mean \$1 million raised by year’s end, according to a news release.

After the Statesman Journal published a story about problems at the Grove of Titans last year, the story spread nationwide.

Many large news outlets, including the New York Times and San Francisco Chronicle, picked up the story. Merck, whose father was a councilor of Save the Redwoods League from 1953 to 1984, saw the story in the Chronicle and was inspired to offer the donation.

The groups will need to raise another \$2.5 million to complete the project, but Tim Whalen, chief development officer for SRL, said it shouldn’t be a problem.

“The League has a long and successful history of raising funds for land protection projects like Grove of Titans,” Whalen said in an email. “We anticipate most of the funds for this project will come from individuals and private family foundations.”

There is a level of urgency, said Joanna Di Tommaso, development director for Redwood Parks Conservancy.

“People have asked me if this project is really necessary, because the damage may not be glaringly apparent to a casual hiker,” Di Tommaso said. “My answer is, yes, there is very real damage, and it will only increase over time. Action is absolutely necessary.”

“Only five percent of the ancient redwoods remain,” she added. “Any threat to any of them must be addressed.”

How the grove was discovered

Steve Sillett is one of the world’s foremost redwood botanists and a celebrity of sorts in the big tree world.

The first scientist to enter and study the redwood canopy, Sillett pioneered new methods for climbing tall trees with ropes, harnesses and pulleys. He studied the plants and animals that live hundreds of feet above ground in the redwood’s botanical islands.

Despite the scientific accomplishments — and profiles in The New Yorker

and National Geographic — it’s the story of how he and Taylor discovered the Grove of Titans that’s become almost mythic in big tree circles.

In May 1998, the two decided to explore the unmapped valleys in Jedediah Smith’s old-growth jungles for the big trees they thought might be growing there.

“For the first quarter of a mile, they had to crawl through underbrush on their hands and knees, sometimes lying flat on their stomachs and belly-crawling,” Preston wrote in “The Wild Trees.” “They wormed under tight masses of huckleberry bushes, or they turned their bodies sideways and rammed through them.”

The two ended up crawling down a creek, becoming cold and soaked and exhausted. They yelled at each other for committing such a “heinous bushwhack.”

As darkness came on, Taylor reached a fallen redwood trunk and climbed atop it. In front of him was something almost beyond imagination.

“It was the largest redwood trunk he had seen in all his years of exploring the North Coast,” Preston wrote.

That day became known as the “day of discovery.”

The Grove of Titans doesn’t host the world’s tallest trees — they’re shorter than the tallest coast redwood of 380 feet — but they have particularly massive trunks. The Screaming Titans, two redwoods fused together, is 30 feet in diameter at its base. That’s wider than General Sherman, the famous giant of Sequoia National Park.

Sillett and Taylor gave the grove’s largest trees names such as El Viejo del Norte, Earendil, Elwing and Lost Monarch. There are about 10 particularly giant trees in the grove.

“We now know of larger trees elsewhere,” Sillett said in 2017. “But there’s something about that setting, with the creek right there and so many big trees spaced out, that’s incredibly gorgeous.”

Sillett spent countless hours in the grove conducting research, but it remained a blank spot on the map until 2007.

That began to change with publication of “Wild Trees.”

Second discovery and damage

Mario Vaden, an arborist from Southern Oregon, was one of the first explorers to seek out the Grove of Titans.

He was already exploring redwoods off-trail when “Wild Trees” was published. Using maps, compasses and satellite imagery, he located the Titans in 2008. But he made sure to keep the location secret, he said.

“It was this pristine oasis — it looked basically untouched by humans,” Vaden

said in 2017.

Park officials denied knowledge of the grove despite growing interest from the public.

“In the beginning, management policy was not to tell people where it was, so they wouldn’t go looking for it,” Silver said. “What ended up happening was that people went looking anyway.”

And the location slowly leaked out.

Websites were established that showcased pictures of the trees and told of epic adventures to find them. Around 2011, a website posted GPS coordinates of the grove, Vaden said. By 2012, human impact in the grove was noticeable.

“It was still beautiful but you would no longer recognize it as being some hidden nook,” Vaden said.

It was the rise of social media — spreading the location to an even larger audience — that forced parks officials to change policy.

“Just a couple people searching off-trail is one thing,” Silver said. “But when it’s 50 to 60 people every single day that’s entirely different. We knew we had to do something.”

Signs asking people to stay on official trails were first placed in summer of 2017 on Mill Creek Trail, but people still travel off trail seeking the Titans, Silver said.

Official trails in the redwoods — along with campgrounds — are specially designed to protect redwood roots. User trails are not, and can have a negative impact on the trees’ health, Sillett said.

“Redwoods are not deeply rooted — they tend to stretch across the surface, which is where they forage for nutrients and oxygen,” Sillett said. “People stepping on them all the time has a negative effect on their health. They won’t die tomorrow, but their health is degraded.”

“One of the disadvantages to being a tree is that you can’t move.”

How to donate

To donate to the project, visit SaveTheRedwoods.org/Titans or Groveof-Titans.org.

You may also make donations by calling Save the Redwoods League at (415) 820-5800 or Redwood Parks Conservancy at (707) 465-7329.

Note: All pictures and videos seen here were taken prior to 2017, when parks officials began asking visitors to avoid the Grove of Titans area.

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