

DRAFT

A Restoration Approach to Forest Management at the Bohemian Grove

By John C. Hooper

The Bohemian Grove (“the Grove”) offers a splendid opportunity for restoration of old forest characteristics over a large property. In fact, there may be no greater opportunity on private land anywhere within close proximity of the Bay Area. Even if the Grove were composed exclusively of the 100-110 year old mature second growth redwood stands which cover much of the property, it would already be an unusual restoration opportunity. The fact that these mature second growth stands are intermingled with significant stands of true old growth redwood and Douglas-fir trees makes the opportunity unique (see *The Redwood Forest*, edited by Reed F. Noss, Island Press, 2000, at pages 229-230)

During the past year, concerns over management of the Bohemian Grove have increased, with the public (and, indeed, some Bohemian Club members) asking why the Bohemian Club is pushing for approval of an aggressive, permanent timber-harvesting plan on its unique property. The importance of this property needs to be understood in a broader context to help convince the Bohemian Club leadership that there are preferable ways of managing this forest which will result in long-term benefits for the landowners themselves as well as for the public and the environment.

The Bohemian Club owns 2700 acres of spectacular forestland in Sonoma County along the lower Russian River. The property consists of the largest acreage of old growth and mature second growth redwood and Douglas-fir forest in Sonoma County, and for that matter, the largest unprotected stands anywhere within 70 miles of the Bay Area. The old growth portion of the Bohemian Grove, estimated at 163 acres by the Grove Superintendent, is nearly twice as large as the 85-acre old growth component of Armstrong Redwood State Reserve, a few miles up the Russian River. The Bohemian Grove is also five times as large as world-famous Muir Woods. The unique features of this property and its proximity to the Bay Area are precisely why the public is taking an active and legitimate interest in the permit application now under way.

Unlike state parks and reserves, the privately owned Bohemian Grove is not protected from commercial logging. The owner of the property, San Francisco’s venerable Bohemian Club, has logged the property continuously for the past 23 years, removing between 10 million and 11 million board feet of redwood and Douglas-fir from the land during that period at a rate of approximately 500,000 board feet per year. This recent logging has involved damage to old growth stands, and has resulted in the fragmentation of the property through extensive new road construction, erosion problems, loss of wildlife habitat and diminished recreational opportunities.

In 2006, the Bohemian Club applied for a Non-Industrial Timber Management Plan (NTMP) through the California Department of Forestry, a permit which, if granted, will convey a permanent right to remove between 1.1 million and 1.6 million board feet of timber from the property annually. This project has been criticized by a number of experts as a “hard industrial model” and “little more than a strategy for extracting commercially valuable products from the forest”, rather than a strategy for reducing fire hazard, as asserted by the Bohemian Club.

The science of forestry has advanced dramatically in the past twenty years, away from a discipline which focuses almost entirely on timber cutting from our forests toward a more nuanced process which incorporates many other forest values: wildlife habitat, protection of streams and rivers, biodiversity and restoration of natural values for recreational as well as scientific purposes. In addition, with a growing awareness of the challenges posed by global climate change, standing forests are now coming to be valued for their ability to pull carbon out of the atmosphere and store it in trees for long periods. Ironically, this new scientific awareness of the values of forests for other than timber production has developed during exactly the same period that the Bohemian Club has resumed commercial logging of its stands.

What might the elements of an alternate restoration strategy for the Bohemian Grove look like if the Bohemian Club leadership could be convinced to abandon its timber harvest-dominated plans? Here are a few thoughts:

First, do no more harm. The magnitude of commercial logging at the Grove since 1984 has created erosion, landslides and siltation problems. It has degraded old growth stands, damaged wildlife habitat and reversed a natural process of forest recovery which had been going on for more than 80 years. The most important immediate step The Bohemian Club can take to protect its forest is to stop commercial logging of the property and withdraw its proposed NTMP. Significant damage to the forest has occurred since 1984, including removal of old growth redwood and Douglas-fir stands as well as fragmentation of the property caused by a significant road-building program.

Second, the Bohemian Club should identify a funding source other than the sale of timber to fund necessary forestry-related work. For an organization as wealthy as the Bohemian Club, this should not be a burden. For example, adding a \$4 per month surcharge to each member's bill earmarked for a forest management fund would generate over \$100,000 per year. This is the equivalent of buying one drink, and many Bohemian Club members would be happy to pay such a small price to end the club's destructive and controversial commercial logging practices.

Third, the club should develop a Master Plan to restore the entire Grove property toward old forest characteristics and ecological health for the long-term enjoyment of Club members and the numerous biological benefits such a course of action would bring. Such a plan would take advantage of natural successional processes over the passage of considerable time to heal the land rather than emphasizing intensive timber harvesting, herbicide applications and road construction. Such a plan should also involve simplifying the road system and decommissioning those roads which were built primarily for logging access or which follow stream courses. Roads are generally among the most damaging legacies of logging, scarring the landscape, fragmenting stands and causing erosion.

Important old growth areas should be linked to one another so that corridors for birds and wildlife are defined and developed. For example, the main Grove could easily be managed to create a corridor from Morse Stephens canyon up through the North Fork of Kitchen Creek and eastward through the Bull barn and Upper Hollow tree old growth stands. with intervening areas, where recent logging has damaged the stands, allowed to develop a higher index of structural diversity over time, including large reiterative branches, fallen logs, vegetation mats, dead standing trees (snags), tree hollows and broad stream corridors,

Smith Creek and Kitchen Creek, the two principal watersheds on the property, could be managed much more carefully as fish and amphibian streams; a fish ladder could be installed at the lower end of Smith Creek to facilitate spawning, a recommendation the Department of Fish and Game made nearly ten years ago.

Fourth, the Bohemian Club needs to identify and manage those finite areas within the property where an elevated fire hazard may genuinely exist – on south facing slopes where hardwoods and fuel ladders tend to be concentrated, and areas near buildings where a defensive perimeter needs to be established. But such fire hazard reduction efforts need to be clearly distinguished from commercial logging. Failure to make that distinction has been one of the main points of controversy about the current draft NTMP.

If the Bohemian Club were willing to take these steps, the property would rapidly evolve into an even more special and unique property that generations of Bohemians can enjoy and be proud of and that members of the general public would also take pride in and will view the Bohemian Club as an enlightened steward – rather than a rapacious neighbor.

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