



Conversation with author of new book on California trees

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*Jared Farmer, Utah native and associate professor of history at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, released his third book this week: **Trees in Paradise: A California History**. The book traces the history of redwoods, eucalyptus, citrus and palms in the Golden State from 1848 to today. Farmer takes a unique approach by melding cultural and natural histories, taking a deep-dive into early horticulturalism, and exploring John Muir's arbo-patriotism and the 20th-century timber wars. We recently caught up with Farmer — who's also a former High Country News intern — about his book.*

High Country News *What led you to this topic?*

Jared Farmer I trace the origins of my book to three haunts. First was the backyard of my father's childhood home outside Los Angeles. Dad waxed nostalgic for the fruit trees there, and Grandma mailed a red-stained box of pomegranates every winter to Utah, where I grew up. Second was the greenhouse my father built in snowy Utah to grow his own citrus and figs. Third was my initial California residence: Stanford University — a school with an ostentatious Palm Drive, a citrus courtyard, aromatic groves of eucalyptus, and splendid relict oaks, not to mention a redwood on its seal and a dancing tree as its unofficial mascot.

HCN *Your book is filled with so many obscure facts — everything from the role of eugenicists in the early days of the Save-the-Redwoods League, to the post-Depression palm-planting frenzy in L.A. Which is your favorite random factoid in the book, and what's one that didn't make the cut?*

JF Single out my favorite factoid? That would be like asking Brigham Young to name his favorite child. One of my favorite details is the former tradition of Sierra Club members to visit the grave of John Muir and sing “Auld Lang Syne” with arms

linked around the giant trunk of the nearby manna gum eucalyptus tree. Such a ceremony of non-native belongingness wouldn't happen today. I also like the story of the redwood log in Humboldt County chainsaw-carved into a giant peanut as an anti-environmentalist protest symbol. Not to mention all the fun stuff I left out, including Faisal II, the last king of Iraq, and his tour of Muir Woods, or the annual Yuletide radio program at the General Grant (officially the "Nation's Christmas Tree").

HCN *One of the book's themes is misperception of reality. One example is that people once believed the American West would get more rain if more trees were planted. What do you consider the most significant misperception in the history of California trees?*

JF That the former treeless environments of lowland California — the grasslands and wetlands of the Central Valley and the Los Angeles Plain — were biological deserts. Not so. By reallocating the waters and by cultivating fruit trees by the millions and billions, American settlers performed a miracle — they turned the Golden State green — but in the process they committed ecocide against fish, amphibians, mammals and migratory birds.

HCN *You write about the widespread fear of timber famine at the turn of the 20th century, and how hard it is for us to imagine that fear, since comparatively little of our infrastructure and household items are made of wood. Was that paranoia founded, and do you think there's a resource that we have a similar relationship to today?*

JF The phobia was factually founded in the sense that American foresters projected future wood use using historical data for domestic consumption and production. They failed to anticipate technological advances in concrete, steel, and plastic — not to mention plywood and particleboard, and the modern global trade in forest products. Today, our relationship to plastic is similar in its ubiquity. And our relationship to rare earth minerals is similar in the way we fear future scarcity.

HCN *You explore how coastal redwoods and Sierra sequoias were used differently because of geography and transportation. How did these circumstances help determine the fate of these two ecosystems?*

JF In the nineteenth century, redwoods were simply more merchantable than sequoias. First of all, their wood was superior. More to the point, redwoods grew in thick forests near ocean ports, whereas sequoias grew in isolated groves on inland mountains. However, the Big Trees were conveniently located for a small but influential group: the genteel eastern tourists who took the Western "grand tour." Because a

couple groves of sequoias grew near Yosemite Valley, the top attraction in the Golden State, the Big Trees quickly became national icons. By contrast, the North Coast forest was out of sight, out of mind for Easterners until the automobile age. Largely for these reasons, sequoias transitioned from a commercial resource to an aesthetic resource before redwoods.

HCN *You write that: “Rather than privileging the tallest and oldest ... environmentalists might have focused on the creation and stewardship of a new redwood forest. ... (But) it’s hard to imagine a successful movement to commit limited tax dollars to save the second growth.” Do you think this approach would have been better in the long run?*

JF Ecologically speaking, it would be preferable to have an unbroken expanse of redwood forest under the management of federal or state foresters. In other words: a reserve large and diverse enough to be managed as an ecosystem, and resilient enough to withstand floods, fires and climate change. Instead we mainly have small, isolated, monotype forest parks that allow tourists to marvel at the tallest trees. Obtaining these “cathedral groves” for the public domain was incredibly expensive and often divisive. Here’s an alternative scenario: What if the government (with or without philanthropic help) had purchased cutover and second-growth redwood property back when it was relatively cheap? The public could have secured exponentially more land — the foundation for a magnificent forest restoration project — for a fraction of the economic and social costs. That’s different than saying Redwood Creek and the Headwaters Forest did not deserve protection.

HCN *You write that redwoods, eucalypts, citruses and palms each had a heyday and a downfall. Which experienced the biggest fall from grace?*

JF I’ll say eucalyptus — for falling the farthest, and falling more than once, yet never losing all its grace. From the 1850s through the 1970s, this tree type was championed variously as a firewood source, a beneficial climate changer, a regional remedy for malaria, a national savior for a looming “hardwood famine,” a speculative moneymaker, and a biofuel source. For all these aspirations except the first, eucalyptus failed to meet expectations. Nonetheless, for roughly the first three quarters of the twentieth century, Californians loved eucalypts like adopted family. These trees from Australasia made lowland California more beautiful, wooded, and green — okay, *blue-green*. And they made the Golden State smell like home. Now, by contrast, eucs are deeply contested symbols of non-nativeness, ecological folly, and fire hazard. The

genus has become flora non grata to many California environmentalists. Even so, the trees still inspire passionate defenders.

HCN *You end up portraying eucalypts as not necessarily deserving of pejorative terms like “alien.” What’s so great about these water-hoarding trees?*

JF It’s puzzling that cultivated eucalyptus has become a symbol of invasion in California. Instead it should be seen as a historical symbol of desire. Californians desired eucs because they grew quickly, because they tolerated a variety of growing conditions (including heat and drought), and mostly because the foliage and bloom and scent and shade made the Golden State more beautiful.

Like it or not, the hard-and-fast categories of “native” and “non-native” are losing applicability. Going forward, we need subtler terminology and politics to deal with the problem of plants out of place. Eucalyptus belongs in some parts of California and doesn’t belong in others. It depends on context. In nature preserves like Channel Islands National Park and fire-prone neighborhoods like the Berkeley Hills, it makes perfect sense to thin their numbers or eradicate them. But in other places — for example, the edges of farms, highways, campuses, metropolitan parks — eucs ought to be maintained as elements of the biocultural landscape. Here they should be tended and replanted as part of the Golden State’s heritage. Only we don’t have to use the same trees as nineteenth-century planters. Botanists and arborists can recommend species and varieties that are shorter, less messy, and more water wise than the old popular favorite, Tasmanian blue gums.

HCN *What book is next on your list to write?*

JF I plan to write about one of the most significant changes in recent history: the instrumentalization of looking at the planet’s surface from high above, and how that vantage has changed the way we fight wars and manage resources. In other words: a history of aerial photography, satellite imagery and remote sensing, from the invention of the camera through Google Earth and Predator drones. I’m calling it simply *The Aerial View*.

Tay Wiles is the online editor at High Country News. She tweets @taywiles.