

**Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Distinguished Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.**

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Coastal Invasions**



*Large Southern California eucalyptus in about 1900*

We are nearly surrounded by plants here on the Central Coast that came from somewhere else. Today some are known as cash crops and others as invasive species. There are the good (citrus, avocados, olives, figs and artichokes, to name a

few), the bad (and I may take some heat for this list): pampas grass, Scotch and French Broom, acacia, ice plant, eucalyptus), and the ugly (poison hemlock and thistle).

In fact, many of these are so widespread that they may appear to many to be natural parts of our landscape. Natural Bridges State Beach is a good example, where people come from all over the world to see the Monarch butterflies by the thousands hanging on the eucalyptus trees. In fact eucalyptus trees are all over California, but aren't even close to being native.

Eucalyptus and ice plant (also known as Hottentot fig) are about as common as any other plants along our coastline, yet both were introduced and originally came from about as far away as you can get from here, Australia and South Africa.

When Gaspar de Portolà and his ragged army of men first made their way along our coast in 1769, the terraces of the Santa Cruz and the north coast were devoid of trees. The salt air and wind didn't allow anything very tall to grow. Today, however, eucalyptus is probably more common than any other coastal tree and grows right on the edge of the coastal bluff.

Our Australian invaders line the Old Coast Road that parallels Highway 1 at Davenport. They are found along a portion of the bike path to Wilder Ranch and the trees line much of Western Drive. Eucalyptus line the back edge of Lighthouse Field, are found along East Cliff at Twin Lakes, Corcoran Lagoon, and Moran Lake, as well as growing along Park Avenue in Capitola, to name just a few areas many of us pass by regularly.

And why are they spread throughout Santa Cruz County as well as California? There are a number of reasons but one of the most interesting and obscure ones was the belief that these trees miraculously stopped malaria. It's not common knowledge but malaria was actually a serious problem in California in the late 1800s in the Sacramento Valley.

The name malaria actually came from Latin words mal and aria or literally bad air, and it was believed at that time malaria came from moist soils and it escaped into the night air during the summer months. The damp and chilly night air was thought to carry lots of evil things, including malaria. And the aroma and oils emanating from eucalyptus were thought by many to somehow purify the air.

This was in the days before we knew malaria was carried by mosquitos that laid their eggs in standing water or swampy areas. Because eucalyptus suck up large amounts of water, they can drain damp areas and thereby destroy the habitat of the mosquito, and in the process reduce the spread of the disease.

Before the 1850s, California didn't have a single eucalyptus tree, although the state already had about 130 other introduced plant species. Following its introduction and spread throughout Europe, North Africa, India, and South America, California settlers became increasingly interested in the eucalyptus.

It was a novelty tree of sorts, coming all the way from Australia, but the California Gold Rush of the late 1840s and early 1850s created high demand for lumber for construction and also for fuel. Deforestation had already become a serious concern and led to the passage of the California Tree Culture Act of 1868, which was

created to encourage people to plant more trees, particularly along roads. And eucalyptus served this purpose well.

On an economic basis, lots of early entrepreneurs rushed to capitalize on the situation, believing, as did many, that blue gum trees or eucalyptus could also be used for medicine, wood pulp, honey, both industrial and medicinal oils, and also wind breaks for farmland. Over 100 companies had sprung up by the early 1900s that were involved in the eucalyptus industry. It faded pretty quickly, but not until after thousands of acres has already been planted.