

What S.F. should never see: a plan to rid The City of trees



Ken Garcia's column appears Tuesdays, Thursdays and weekends in The Examiner.

has no meaning for you.

Ken Garcia, The Examiner
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SAN FRANCISCO -

The feral cat lobby was out in full force this week, trying to tell the members of San Francisco's Recreation and Park Commission to make sure they save the furry creatures if and when they start cutting down trees.

The quail lobby may not have gotten the e-mails because they weren't out in full fury — its members can't stand the feral cats because they kill their beloved birds. The dog lobby was present, as always, trying to protect its share of open space. In The City's vicious cycle of special interest groups, everybody has a cause.

But one lobby that is cause for alarm — the one that has difficulty seeing the forest through the trees — won a major victory this week, and tree-huggers everywhere should take note. That is, unless "alien species"

The Recreation and Park Commission approved a plan that will require an 18-month environmental review to determine the impacts of cutting down thousands of non-native trees throughout San Francisco's parks. But giving a green light to any proposal pushed by the park department's Natural Areas Program is a double-edged saw, since, based on its history, NAP has hardly felt official sanctions were necessary to carry out its agenda.

For those in need of a refresher course, it was the members and volunteers of the Natural Areas Program that took it upon themselves a few years back to start clear-cutting eucalyptus trees and other "non-native species" around Lake Merced, Mount Davidson, Hawk Hill, McLaren Park and elsewhere in their pursuit of a more pure, indigenous landscape. The only problem was, the group and its merry band of followers didn't have any permits to rev up their chain saws — leading to one of the more embarrassing chapters in the Recreation and Park Department's bumpy history.

That incident will surprise almost no one who has followed NAP since its creation from a group of activist acorns almost 10 years ago. I first heard about it by accident when I attended a Recreation and Park Commission hearing in 1997 while working on a series on the decline of Golden Gate Park. At the hearing was a group of native plant "enthusiasts" who were there to save what they called one of the "last sand dunes in San Francisco." And that will tell you mountains about the views of NAP.

For as any person indigenous to San Francisco would tell you, much of The City, and certainly all of Golden Gate Park, was a giant sand dune until 120 or so years ago, when officials decided to create parks and build homes — in other words, build a city. Blocks of the Outer Sunset remained sand

dunes until the mid-'70s — but you can still find plenty of them if you visit Ocean Beach.

So irony is not one of the strong traits of the true believers who make up NAP, but I don't wish to quarrel over its atavistic bent. I just want to point out, as a public service, that any program that would ostensibly give this group the right to cut down up to thousands of trees needs to be scrutinized like a hawk.

I am all for protecting native habitat, and eucalyptus trees were probably not the best choice when much of The City's forests were planted a century ago, given their encroachment tendencies with other plants and trees and grasses. But it should be pointed out that there are considerably more plant species here today than there were when all of those horrible non-native types arrived, and they've managed to survive without NAP's heavy-handed intervention.

And that would be the only way to describe the group's style to date, highlighted by the destruction of groves of trees around The City because they were allegedly interfering with the precious native plants the program is dedicated to protect. Indeed, at least one person in NAP's core group of volunteers has been arrested more than once for cutting down trees without a permit — even in San Francisco you can't give license to every sand-dune savior who wants to whack down trees they refer to as "alien species."

Almost all of the Rec and Park commissioners were not on the panel when NAP's misadventures first surfaced four years ago. But in conversations I had with a few of them, they said they were aware of some of the program's shady history and vowed to be vigilant.

"I think that by approving an official policy we'll be able to monitor it better," Commissioner Jim Lazarus told me. "I know in the past [the program] was kind of run amok."

Some people will certainly be watching. In San Francisco, even trees have a lobby.

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