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We must act now to save trees for Florida's future generations

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North America's most iconic trees, the redwoods (a generic term that includes redwoods and sequoias, with the species California redwood specifically referring to *Sequoia sempervirens*) are in imminent danger of burning in wildfires.

Why does this matter to us in Florida?

Florida is not immune to wildfires either as we well know. In early May of this year, more than 22,000 acres were scorched in Florida wildfires. As the Sunshine State continues to experience an increasingly hotter climate with more frequent droughts, wildfires will become more frequent and fierce.

Did you know that trees shed their outermost branches during drought as a miraculous moisture conservation strategy? Doing so helps them survive but, unfortunately, it also creates an accumulation of dry tinder. Extreme drought, in combination with dry tinder, sets the stage for extreme fire risk. What's happening in California could well happen here. Could you imagine if this was happening in our beloved Myakka River State Park? We must look to California now for solutions that we may well need in Florida, and sooner than we might like to think.

Last year, approximately 10% of our country's remaining redwoods faced extraordinary threats of fire, and this year looks even more ominous. These giants of the tree world have existed for millennia, and while they used to thrive throughout the northern hemisphere, our country, specifically the northern pacific coast, is their only remaining home.

I was honored to write the science chapter in Save the Redwoods League's centennial book *The Once and Future Forests – California's Iconic Redwoods* (Heyday Books, 2018). The book is filled with stunning images, but what if all our children ever see of the redwood trees are photos in a

book? As compelling as the images are, they are nothing compared to protecting and being able to see the real thing: America's biggest, oldest and treasured trees.

While Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris is undergoing rapid reconstruction after the 2019 fire, redwoods can never be rebuilt. The restoration of a mature redwood grove will take thousands of years – if at all – because recreating the conditions for those delicate seedlings to germinate is a very complex ecosystem process.

And restocking all the thousands of species – probably millions – which inhabit enormous redwood canopies is probably impossible: it would require scientists create a vault to store all those insects, fungi, animals and birds for up to a thousand years' time while young redwoods grew to adult stature.

The stewards of redwood trees are proposing sprinkler systems to protect these wonderful giants. It's a good short-term solution. We install sprinklers for our best urban architecture, including Notre Dame and giant skyscrapers, all of which can ostensibly be replaced if damaged.

But redwoods can not be replaced within at least 50 generations of children, so the need is urgent to protect them before they become endangered by wildfire. The best solutions are to:

- Ameliorate climate change.

- Seek to minimize extreme droughts and heat waves that result when we spew carbon dioxide into our atmosphere.

- Expand areas of pavement and urban roofing – neither of which conserve the natural water cycle very effectively.

One way to slow climate change is to eliminate deforestation of our vital forests around the planet. To act on this need, the TREE Foundation has launched MISSION GREEN, an international initiative to build canopy walkways for ecotourism in the top 10 biodiversity "Hot Spots." This would provide economic opportunities to local communities other than logging in areas where deforestation is destroying species habitat and contributing to global warming.

I certainly hope that the world's forests will not become strewn with sprinkler systems, but I passionately want my grandchildren to be able to look up in awe at a healthy 300-foot redwood – or walk under the gorgeous, uniquely-Florida forest canopy found at Myakka River State Park – and experience a sense of wonder for Mother Nature. We must act now to protect our trees for young and future generations.

Meg Lowman is the executive director of the TREE Foundation, which is based in Sarasota. She is also the founder of MISSION GREEN.