

### Life in the canopy

Professor Stephen C. Sillett is a scientist attached to the Institute for Redwood Ecology at Humboldt State University in the USA. He has made a special study of the ecology of tall trees and the forests they create. His remarkable work has given the world a new understanding of what happens high in the canopy of the coast redwood forests, where rare epiphytes and wildlife survive in the delicate microclimates created in the crowns. Professor Sillett is also the only person who has climbed to the top of the five tallest tree species in the world, each rising to over 91.44m (300ft). The tallest tree he has scaled is a coast redwood of 115m (377¼ft), where he discovered an unexpectedly rich community of plant and animal life.



Kashaya Pomo people, who occupied the land in what is now Sonoma county (just north of San Francisco), offered a prayer to their supreme Creator, explaining why the plants were being taken. A special song was sung to the earth spirit to ward off evil; some form of personal sacrifice was also made – perhaps an offering of food or sharing of the produce collected. Selfishness was considered undesirable social behaviour, eventually leading to personal loss or bad luck.

Only 150 years ago, the redwood forest along the Pacific coast was the home of numerous native peoples, including the Sinkyone, the Kashaya Pomo, the south-western Pomo, the Wappo (Ashochimi), the Mendocino and the Tolawa. The Sinkyone people, who are extinct today, regarded the redwoods as sacred protectors of the whole forest, especially of the streams on which so much else depended. Redwood groves acted as guardians of the spirits of their ancestors, whose sacred burial grounds lay among the giant redwood trees or close to them. Kashaya-speaking peoples still have a detailed understanding of the redwood's botany – their conception of plants and plant communities is analogous to that used by Western botanists. Native peoples used redwood timber for house and boat construction and used other parts of the tree for medicines.

The powerful European culture that arrived with the settlers in the middle of the nineteenth century was based on values that were diametrically opposed to those of the indigenous peoples of the region, many of whom, along with their cultures, became extinct. The magnificent redwood trees, so pivotal to their societies, were felled in vast numbers. In 1999, however, the US government paid a lumber company \$480 million in order to save the largest tract of privately owned coastal redwood forest at the time. In the last ten years, a further 2,800 ha. (11 sq. miles) of 'old growth' forest has been purchased from the timber industry.

ABOVE  
Kings Canyon National Park in California has the largest remaining grove of ancient giant redwoods.

OPPOSITE  
The enormous, almost branchless giant redwood trunks attracted loggers in the nineteenth century.