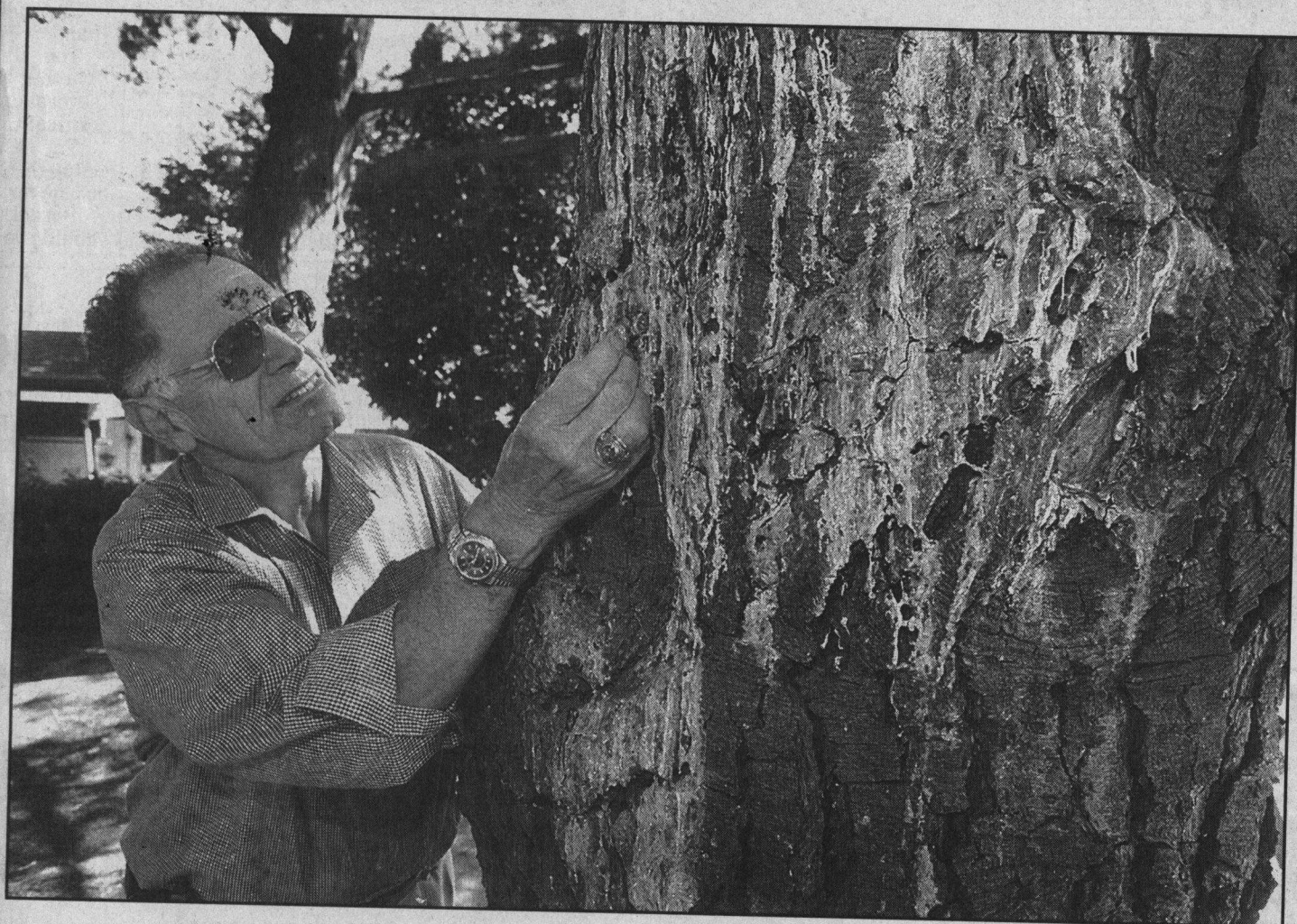


Pines' illness stirs debate



Dan Coyo/Sentinel

Rudy Quintanar, superintendent of the city Parks Department, looks at pitch oozing from a Monterey pine scheduled to be removed from Garfield Park on the Westside. The trees are succumbing to pitch canker disease.

Group wants Monterey pine placed on endangered list; critics say it won't help

By APRIL JOHNSON
Sentinel correspondent

Trees

SANTA CRUZ — Monterey pines have every right to feel threatened.

Over the past several years, the California trees have been disappearing at an alarming rate. In response, the Monterey chapter of the Native Plant Society has petitioned the state Fish and Game Commission to list the tree as a threatened species.

But at Año Nuevo State Reserve, one of three places Monterey pines grow natively in the United States, some rangers feel that the move would amount to too little too late.

"Adding the tree to a threatened species list will be a moot point in 20 years," said ranger Leander Tamoria. "The trees will all be gone by then anyway due to the pitch canker disease."

Carol Kelley of the Santa Cruz chapter of the California Native Plant Society disagrees.

"At this time, we have had a realization that the population will vanish unless we do something," Kelley said. "As plants become scarcer and scarcer, we must act."

Bruce Elliot of the state Fish and Game Commission said adding the tree to the threatened species list would limit the harvesting of the tree from the wild without the permission of the state.

Pitch canker, a fungal disease that results in resinous or pitchy sores on all woody parts of the tree, has played a key role in the shrinking pine population in the Santa Cruz area.

First detected in California in 1986, the disease has killed 25 percent of the native pines in Año Nuevo, 30 miles north of Santa Cruz. And, according to the California Department of Forestry, it threatens to destroy 85 percent of the pines in all of California within the next 20 years.

According to forestry officials, there is no effective control of pitch canker using either chemical or biological agents.

Evidence of the disease can be seen all over Santa Cruz.

"One merely has to drive along Highway 1 to see the damage," said Rudy Quintanar, superintendent of the city Parks Department. "All along the road there are places where Caltrans has had to remove infected trees. We have been severely affected."

Nonetheless, Quintanar feels that putting the trees on the list would do little to save them.

"There is nothing that we can do," he said. "Researchers are trying to find cures, but there is nothing that I, or the homeowners, can do to stop this disease."

Don Owen, chairman of the Department of Forestry's Pitch Canker Task Force, is also skeptical about the usefulness of listing the tree.

"The good that may come of it is that it would bring more attention to the death of the trees," Owen said. "The bad thing is that it may restrict our research and removal of infected trees."

"Disease management is currently limited to the removal and disposal of infected trees," Owen said. "We have also recom-

mended that the movement of diseased firewood and the planting of susceptible tree species be restricted."

Native Monterey pines grow in only three places in the United States — the Monterey Peninsula, Año Nuevo State Reserve and Cambria — and on two small islands off Baja California, Cedros and Guadalupe. While they used to cover 23,694 acres, they now grow on only 13,575 acres.

While at least 90 percent of the Santa Cruz-area trees are expected to become infected in the next two decades, Owen said some may escape the disease.

"Some pines seem to be resistant and these may be the ones that save future pine populations," said Owen, who is involved with researching the genes of the resistant trees.

He recommends that residents who have pine trees watch them closely for dying branches, a sign of pitch canker. But if the tree does exhibit dying branches, don't "jump the gun and chop the whole thing down," Owen said.

"Trees vary in response to the disease. Not all trees that become infected die," Owen said. "Those that don't die could be valuable for gene research."

Kelley of the Native Plant Society agrees. "We must protect the few trees that may be inherently resistant," she said. "If we preserve the few, maybe we won't lose all of our pines."

For more information on pitch canker, visit the Pitch Canker Task Force Internet site, http://frap.cdf.ca.gov/pitch_canker/

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