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Eucalyptus: Invader also holds Bay Area Identity

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By John King

Early this fall, I drove south from Tomales on Highway 1. Swinging into the broad curve toward Marshall, I should have been transfixed by the appearance of Tomales Bay and, beyond it, Point Reyes.

Instead, my car entered a stand of eucalyptus, and I was transfixed - by the leathery trunks along the road, the silvery-gray branches and leaves above. The aroma through the open window, and the slits of light through steep shadows.

By the palpable essence of a Northern California we all know.

The above confession flies in the face of ecological correctness hereabouts. Eucalyptus are not natives. They shed limbs. The Oakland hills firestorm of 1991 showed how lethal they can be as neighbors.

These are valid objections. They're also beside the point.

To anyone who grew up in the Bay Area, or who loves its tapestry of climates and terrains, eucalyptus can trigger an emotional response. They're binding elements, signals of place. They run low along ridgelines around the bay, and form a grove on the UC Berkeley campus where poets gather each year to read their work aloud.

Narrow rural roads are marked by single rows of the species, vertical against horizontal, planted decades ago by landowners wanting to stake a claim as well as deflect the wind.

Detractors respond that eucalyptus aren't Californian at all: They arrived in the 1850s with Australian gold miners, touted as a fast-growing solution to shortages of firewood and building materials.

In fact, the blue gums that had gained favor burned all too well and were too brittle for trustworthy construction. But the realization came long after they'd spread across the region to the extent that they rivaled oaks and redwoods.

Since then the species has been depicted as an invasive blight, a mistake that can't be undone. This view was summed up well by Casey Mills in the summer 2010 issue of *California Northern*: "The eucalyptus trees covering our landscape provide a constant reminder of the oddball and terrible little schemes that litter our region's history, schemes entwined with our identity."



Andy Goldsworthy's "Wood Line," an installation in the Presidio, finds a new use for felled eucalyptus - a snakelike undulation 400 yards long.

The catch, of course, is that they are our history - and thus our identity.

Yes, they're implants in the terrain. So are we. So are the vineyards that define Napa Valley and the varied settings of Golden Gate Park.

They're the result of conscious intent every bit as much as Victorian homes or the Campanile or Frank Lloyd Wright's Marin Civic Center.

The natural landscape has been subsumed into a cultural landscape, one with its own defining traits. Each new trait becomes part of the overall mix, fodder to be used and abused and recast.

You see this with Andy Goldsworthy's recent "Wood Line," an installation in San Francisco's Presidio that puts eucalyptus to an entirely new use - a snakelike undulation on the ground, 400 yards long.

The environmental artist lives in Scotland, but this is his second work in the Presidio, commissioned by the Presidio Trust and the local For-Site Foundation.

As eucalyptus planted by the Army were cleared from what now is a national park - some for safety reasons, others to restore watersheds - Goldsworthy would inspect the felled trunks. He'd then have workers cut sections from the keepers, scrape them clean and connect one to the next.

And so we have a supple and surreal presence that laces through a clearing with paved roadway to the east and paved Lovers Lane trail to the west. The bay lies in one direction, Pacific Heights in the other. And what frames the clearing? Surviving stands of eucalyptus - more clearly transplants than ever, all the more compelling for their disconnected grandeur.

To come upon eucalyptus en masse is to be reminded that Northern California has been reshaped many times, by many hands. "Wood Line" shows that the process continues around us, a process that can alter our perception along with our surroundings.