

## Fifty years of discovery

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Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest Manager John Louth (r) presents the new dedication plaque for the Schulman Grove Visitor Center. From left, Edmund Schulman's great-nephew David Edmund Schulman and David's father, Richard Schulman, Kristen Wanez of the Eastern Sierra Interpretive Center and Alaina Salks from the visitor center.

Photo by Mike Bodine

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The Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest celebrated its 50th birthday this weekend as an officially designated botanical site with music, awards, a look at the past and to the future. It was called a "50-year celebration of discovery," not an occasion to mourn. Nearly 150 scientists and researchers joined Forest Service staff and the public at the Schulman Grove east of Big Pine in the White Mountains Saturday afternoon. While the wreckage of the visitor center served as backdrop for the podium, it seemed overshadowed by the oldest trees on Earth and the incensed air. While it was admittedly impossible for the loss of the building not to become a part of everyone's talks and speeches, it did not deter speakers from hailing the people that made the Bristlecone forest a national treasure and invaluable international scientific resource.

Tom Harlan, 73, a retired but still active member of the Tree Ring Research Laboratory at the University of Arizona, at Tuscon, shared history of research at the forest and its significance. He noted that the study of tree rings is a way to study and reconstruct past weather patterns as the rings will reflect larger or smaller rainfall levels back thousands of years. He said this is a much better way to predict future weather patterns.

The records that are kept within the ancient bristlecones are much longer than the current recorded data on weather patterns, which only span the last 100 years of human-recorded weather patterns.

Much of the controversial global warming data is developed from that data.

Harlan said there are dead pieces of wood that date back 8,825 years and even older, smaller chunks dating back 11,000 years that reveal critical weather information. And even when records were kept, access to that data becomes more and more difficult as

researchers pass away. Harlan explained that when a lead scientist or researcher on a project like this dies, the staff and crew are fired and project data is shelved. Meaning, the next researcher must first find then hire or find new volunteer help and then scour boxes of data to try and continue where the last project left off. This is what happened when Edmund Schulman died and then Wes Ferguson died and when Dan Grable passed and then when Val LaMarche passed – all these scientists continuing their research where predecessors left off.

It was Ferguson, for example, who started working on dead trees, pushing the data record for these trees to 8,700 years old and he and staff began tagging trees they had studied. Then LaMarche pushed the dates back to 8,825 years old and now Harlan is trying to fill the gap between those 8,825-year-old dead pieces with those found to be 11,000 years old.

Harlan said funding for these dendrochronology projects is challenging too. He said Schulman did much of his work as a volunteer and so has Harlan, until, he said, an anonymous donor paid for the last 15 years of his work.

Harlan noted he is outliving the poor life expectancy that statistical data seems to suggest Bristlecone researchers have. After quadruple by-pass surgery a few years back he was thinking of giving up the work too, but, “Some projects you don’t want to give up.”

According to population ecologist and researcher from U.C. Santa Cruz Adelia Barber, the trees are not giving up any time soon either. Barber said her work involves studying the forest propagation, or the forest’s growth. She said her data shows that the forest is thriving, reproducing and doing fine – even better at higher elevations. She speculated that this may mean the tree-line is moving in elevation. The White Mountains are the only range on the planet that has such old trees growing at such a high elevation.

Harlan joked that it is not a question of how Bristlecone pines live to be so long, but why they take so long to die. Bristlecones are not unique in their ability to survive with just a small bit of bark while the rest of the tree dies, but Bristlecones are the best at it.

Not giving up was a sentiment addressed by many of the speakers.

Inyo County Supervisor Jim Bileyu told the audience of his first visit to “one of the most beautiful places in the world” and what an important part of Inyo’s economy the Bristlecones are, bringing in some 30,000 tourists annually to the forest. He said he was sure the place will be rebuilt and although Inyo County and its small revenue base had little to contribute monetarily, if he had the money himself he would rebuild it.

But, John Louth, Bristlecone Pine Forest manager, said this Saturday’s event was a celebration, not a fundraiser. In fact, the party included live music with an improvised rendition of “The Bristlecone Blues” and a book signing by three authors of Bristlecone books. There was also the unveiling of a new dedication plaque of Edmund Schulman and his unique grove of ancient trees. The plaque was presented with Richard Schulman and his son David Edmund Schulman – a nephew and great-nephew of the famous dendrochronologist – in attendance.

Richard Schulman pointed out that the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power was an early sponsor of Edmund. The LADWP wanted to know rainfall and weather patterns to better predict future water potential. He explained how important this work is to gaining a “real picture of climate change, something we should be paying attention to – now.”

And right now the trees are alive and doing well, according to Alaina Salks, one of the forest's interpretive naturalists. Salks, in her second season at the visitor center, was saddened that most of her efforts to organize and rewrite manuals for the center were lost in the fire, but was glad the trees were fine, the trails are intact and many new exhibits are still safe. Salks explained that this celebration had originally been scheduled for July, but because of delays, it was rescheduled for September. New exhibits highlighting pioneers of dendrochronology, four new touch-screen displays that would allow visitors to view 60- to 90-second movies and the new dedication plaque were put in storage after the celebration had been rescheduled and, coincidentally, were saved from the fire.

George Novinger, who has worked at the visitor center for 18 summers was given a special plaque for his dedication, along with with a custom, Inyo National Forest belt buckle. Novinger, a retired educator from Tehachapi, explained that the honor was a surprise and he was considering making this his last year. But, he said with the visitor center destruction, he may hold on for another year or so.

A new visitor center is expected to be rebuilt in a year or so. Louth said he was astounded by the broad base of support to rebuild.

"The love of this place cuts across political lines," Louth said.

Louth kept reiterating that the focus was on celebrating the botanical preserve. "We're not going away and the trees aren't going away either." As Inyo National Forest Supervisor Jim Upchurch said, "As with all things man creates, we can rebuild with your effort and support. Our lifespan is but a blip of what the trees represent and that's what makes this place so special."