



Catalina Mountains conifers on the way up after '03 fire

Doug Kreutz Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Monday, September 19, 2011 12:01 am

New growth of ponderosa pine trees is creating a sort of bonsai forest in parts of the Catalina Mountains that burned in the 2003 Aspen Fire.

Ponderosas and other conifers - slow to recover after forest fires - have reached heights of 3 to 4 feet in some areas.

But don't expect a return of towering evergreens anytime soon.

Officials of the U.S. Forest Service say it will be decades before some areas regain their pre-fire splendor.

The speed of recovery depends on weather and soil conditions.

"If we go into a warmer, drier period for the next decade, we'll probably still be seeing a bonsai forest," said Heidi Schewel, a spokeswoman for the Forest Service.

The best conditions for a quicker recovery would be "ample rainfall, sunny days for photosynthesis and plant growth, average temperatures and well-drained soils," Schewel said.

A SLOW REBIRTH

Return of mature evergreen forests takes lots of time because conifers recover more slowly than other forest species.

"After a fire, the first things we see are plants that resprout from root systems," Schewel said. "That includes aspens, New Mexico locusts, some oaks and junipers. With good conditions, they can resprout the same year of a fire."

Some of the aspens that resprouted immediately after the 2003 fire have grown to heights of more than 6 feet.

Also recovering quickly after fires are ferns and wildflowers, Schewel said.

"But with conifers such as pines and firs, it's a different story," she said. "They do not resprout from root systems. They must either be regenerated from seed or planted."

Schewel said natural regeneration depends on factors including:

- **Availability of a seed source.** Sources include trees that survived the fire or seeds transported by wind or animals from outside the fire area.
- **Soil composition.** Trees are likely to grow faster in rich soils than in rocky ground.
- **Moisture availability** and the ability of soils to hold water rather than repel it.

Schewel emphasized that hikers and sightseers in the Catalinas can still find tall, healthy trees in areas that escaped the worst of the fire.

"The good news is that the fire burned in a mosaic pattern," she said. "There are areas where the forest was relatively untouched. It's still a beautiful place."

SEE NEW GROWTH

A drive up the Catalina Highway northeast of Tucson will take travelers past spots where evergreens are slowly reclaiming fire-blackened landscapes.

One place for an up-close look is about two miles up the Aspen Trail, which begins in Marshall Gulch south of the mountain village of Summerhaven.

DID YOU KNOW?

Conifer species in the Catalina Mountains include ponderosa pine, Southwestern white pine, Apache pine, Chihuahua pine, Douglas fir, white fir and corkbark fir.

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