



“Currents” June 2021

How Much is a Cypress Tree Worth?

If I asked you to describe the Guadalupe River in Kerr County, chances are your response would include something about towering cypress trees lining the banks. Bald cypress are a quintessential feature of Hill Country rivers and streams. We may admire them because of their awe-inspiring beauty, but they also do a tremendous amount of work to keep the Guadalupe River healthy. Surely, we can agree they are an asset, but can you put a dollar amount on their value?

Bald cypress are conifers which means they have cones and needle-like leaves. Unlike evergreen conifers such as cedar, bald cypress are deciduous because the needles turn brown and fall off each autumn leaving the branches of the tree “bald” during winter. Cypress are adapted to grow in naturally wet conditions and are the largest and most characteristic riparian tree on the Guadalupe River.

The riparian area is a band of dense, native vegetation along a body of water. The distinct soil and vegetation found in riparian areas form a network of roots and ground cover that intercept runoff from upland areas and stabilize the riverbank. These areas also act like a sponge because they can store water from rainfall or floods and slowly release it back into the river during dry times. As a result, riparian areas improve both water quality and quantity. Cypress are a dominant riparian plant and therefore contribute many benefits that keep the river healthy. The woody roots of cypress knit together the banks and form an exceptionally strong bulkhead which helps armor the river’s edge during flash flooding. The fine feeder roots also aid in holding loose soils together to build the soil sponge that boosts flow back into the river. Long, arching cypress limbs also shade the river which reduces the water temperature and improves oxygen levels supporting aquatic organisms like fish. The benefits of large cypress trees extend further than just the riverbank because they function to store great quantities of carbon and filter out pollutants from the atmosphere. Every part of a cypress tree can also provide food and shelter to a variety of organisms from the yellow-crowned night-herons that roost in the limbs to the Guadalupe bass that find cover among the roots.

In addition to the advantages and services that the trees provide to a healthy environment, people have for centuries valued cypress as a timber resource. Joshua Brown, the first recorded settler of Kerr County, harvested cypress to establish a shingle-making camp in present day Kerrville. Cypress lumber can also be used for fence posts, flooring, boats, and you should see the prices a woodworker will pay for reclaimed, antique cypress!

Cypress trees also add value to our quality of life and local economy. Visitors and residents have the opportunity to kayak below towering cypress in Louise Hays Park, walk beneath their cool shade on the River Trail, and watch birds nesting in their limbs from a restaurant’s deck.

With all of these economic, ecological, and community benefits, I think it is easy to quantify the worth of our bald cypress trees...priceless. In a future article, we’ll discuss how land management practices can improve the health of cypress trees and help them continue to support a healthy Guadalupe River.

Let’s Keep Our River Clean

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