Cypress Island - Early Botanical Survey

The flora of Cypress Island has been sporadically documented over the last 200 years, including a brief survey by renowned naturalist Archibald Menzies who, traveling with Captain George Vancouver on his voyage of Discovery, anchored off Cypress on June 8, 1792. Menzies wrote in his journal, "The Island of Cypress is principally composed of high rocky mountains, and steep perpendicular cliffs....the space between the foot of the mountains and the sea-side is occupied by low marshy land, through which are several small runs of most excellent water....On botanizing near-by, Menzies remarked, "...it produced a pleasing variety of the objects of my pursuit & added considerably to my 'Catalogue of Plants.'"

Some say the Rocky Mountain juniper was identified as a cypress tree by members of Vancouver's expedition. It is a member of the cypress family, and the tree after which Cypress Island was named. Rocky Mountain juniper is unusually abundant on Cypress and is only occasionally found on other islands in the San Juan Archipelago.

Glaciation And Serpentine Soil

The Cypress Island NCA remains essentially the rugged environment described by Menzies in part because of its remote location and relative inaccessibility. Historically, glaciation of Cypress covered the predominate steep, and mountainous terrain now dominated by coniferous forests interspersed with grassy balds, rocky outcroppings, and small wetlands.

The presence of serpentine soils throughout the southern two-thirds of the island contributes to a distinctive growth of vegetation both in the forests and in wetlands with serpentine parent materials.

In general, the chemistry of these soils results in a characteristic growth which is characterized by stunted growth, often found on broad ridges and northern slopes with sufficient glacial deposition and soil moisture to support prolonged growth. Western redcedar and western hemlock grow in association with Douglas-fir.

Understory areas which exhibit serpentine characteristics are generally open, and cinnamon fern is a good indicator of serpentine soils. Cypress Island NCA is one of only two protected low-elevation serpentine sites within Washington.

Forests

Cypress Island is dominated by Douglas-fir, a common forest species in the Puget Sound area. Old growth is most often found on broad ridges and northern slopes with sufficient glacial deposition and soil moisture to support prolonged growth. Western redcedar and western hemlock grow in association with Douglas-fir.

Wet shaded areas of protected valleys support red alder, black cottonwood, and bigleaf maple among other species, with sword fern, salalberry, red elderberry, and a variety of herbaceous plants in association.

Natural Treasure

Cypress Island is a natural treasure supporting a diversity of significant natural features that are becoming rare in western Washington. We hope you enjoy your stay, and we encourage you to tread lightly while moving about the island. A Trail Guide and Field Checklist are also available to enhance your visit to this unique natural environment.