Arborist answers call of boosters to save oak

GLEN ELLEN -- A centuries-old oak tree that provided shade and inspiration to writer and adventurer Jack London when he lived in Sonoma County will be allowed to stand for a little longer after lab tests showed it is healthier than California park officials originally thought.

"We couldn't be more thrilled," said Jack London Park Partners executive director Tjiska Van Wyk, whose group manages the Jack London State Historic Park that includes the cottage as well as the ruins of a house that was destroyed by fire in 1913. "In the season of joy, we consider ourselves very fortunate for the good news."

To protect the public and the cottage, the park has instituted new parking restrictions near the tree and plans to inspect and prune it regularly.

"We're not out of the woods. We're in a gray area where the risk of decay due to a fungal disease may still be present," said Lisa Garbelotto, the Berkeley adjunct associate professor who conducted the most recent tests.

The decaying oak was scheduled to be taken down as a safety precaution last month because it is infected with a fungal disease. Officials at Jack London State Historic Park in Glen Ellen worried that a branch could fall off and injure a visitor or damage the cottage where London lived and wrote from 1905 until his death in 1916.

The end was so close that park rangers hosted several events this year to honor the tree, including a Native American blessing ceremony, a dramatic storytelling and having children harvest its acorns for replanting elsewhere.

But park boosters sought a reprieve, turning to a UC Berkeley expert in forest pathology who concluded that "Jack's Oak" had another two to 10 years before it would have to be removed as a safety precaution. Three arborists had determined earlier that the tree was beyond removal because it was beyond "safeguarding" standards.

Garbelotto, who was assisted by UC Berkeley post-doctoral student Susan Karlton in sampling and testing the tree, found that lab tests conducted by the University of California Agricultural Laboratory in Davis, Calif., showed the oak is healthier than expected.

"But the tree needs attention," Garbelotto said. "We're talking about the health of the tree, not about its death."

With the tree determined to be healthy, park officials have no immediate plans for the tree beyond inspecting it and pruning it as needed to keep it healthy. The park has begun a plan to document the tree to verify its condition.

"I think everyone is going to be pleased that this tree has a little more time," Parkman said.
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