

Rhododendron Forest

Ecological Values Synopsis

Forest Type: Douglas fir-western hemlock/Pacific rhododendron-evergreen huckleberry forest association. This name describes the dominant species in the canopy (tree) layer and the shrub layer and is a descriptor for a unique assemblage of trees, shrubs and vascular plants and their dependent species of birds, reptiles, amphibians, mosses, invertebrates, lichens and fungi.

- The Rhododendron Forest was described by the Washington Natural Heritage program scientists as **primarily old-growth Douglas fir** with western hemlock and some western red cedar and white pine. The oldest Douglas firs ranged from **270 to 350 years old**. Approximately one-third of the forest is dominated by a group of mature Douglas fir up to **180 years old** with scattered ancient trees among them. The understory is dominated by Pacific rhododendron with shorter evergreen huckleberry and salal. **The native rhododendrons are often over 150 years old.**
- This forest is recognized nationally by forest classification scientists as endemic to (known only from) the Puget Lowlands of Washington.
- This forest is designated as **Globally Imperiled** by NatureServe, a consortium of Natural Heritage Programs in the U.S. and Canada. It is 1 of only 5 quality forest stands of this type left in the state (and nation). This includes one site scheduled for logging in the near future.
- This forest type has old-growth trees that are much smaller in diameter than the “typical” western Washington old-growth trees because of the gravelly and excessively drained soils. This forest type also has a higher density of trees. Even small diameter trees in this forest stand are often over 100 years old.
- To-date, the only major impacts to the oldest parts of the forest were caused by some selective cutting at the south end and tree clearing and compaction at the primitive campground that is just a small part of the 160 acre forest.
- In 2007, the Natural Heritage Program recommended to Island County Parks that recognition of this forest association in Rhododendron Park and its management in natural condition is critical in the preservation of the state’s natural heritage.