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Hugo - Hugo: Then and Now
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Deep forest rebounds from Hugo

By JOEY HOLLEMAN - jholleman@thestate.com

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Congaree National Park, one of the few spots in South Carolina where man has had little impact on nature, suffered a remarkably deadly punch from Hurricane Hugo. Gusts of 100 mph snapped huge trees or pulled their root balls out of the ground.

The combination of storm damage and lack of previous extensive logging made the park's old-growth forest an ideal place to study the impact of hurricanes on natural forests.

Returning every few years to check on forest plots, University of Georgia research professor Rebecca Sharitz found some tree species were resilient or bounced back quickly. Others still are in the process of recovery, and at least one species of giants may never be the same.

STORY: 'Now we know' hurricanes aren't just coastal disasters

Here's a quick summary of the findings from 20 years of study:

- Trees in the wettest parts of the park, mainly bald cypress and water tupelo, were remarkably tough. Only about 10 percent of those trees were severely damaged. Bald cypress, with small leaves that offered little wind resistance, almost never were uprooted. Tupelo trees had a lot of branches broken in their canopies, but they also were seldom blown down and grew new branches. Twenty years later, the large tree population in these swamp areas is much the same as it was before Hugo.
- In the drier portions of the flood plain forest, about 37 percent of the trees were damaged. While many sweet gums and oaks were uprooted or broken, surviving trees of these species are growing rapidly in the resulting canopy gaps. They also are growing faster than they might in your yard at home, thanks to the fertile soil.
- Loblolly pines took the hardest hit of any of the large trees and are doing the poorest job of recovering. In some areas where loblollies towered over all other trees before Hugo, the new king of the forest soon will be more resourceful sweet gums and oaks.
- Powerful hurricanes in quick succession might bring big changes to an old-growth forest. But hurricanes spaced out over time give forests time to recover. Unless another Hugo-type storm comes along within a few years, the Congaree forest will differ only slightly in density, size of trees and species from its pre-Hugo times.

Reach Holleman at (803) 771-8366.

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