

Fitzroya cupressoides

[Synonyms : *Abies cupressoides*, *Cupressellata patagonica*, *Fitzroya patagonica*, *Pinus cupressoides*]

ALERCE (English, Spanish) is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to Chile and southern Argentina, it has small fragrant brown cones.

It is also known as *Lahuan* (Chilean), and Patagonian cypress.

The tree, although protected, is severely threatened in the wild not least from illegal logging.

From January 2002 Alerce has been included under Appendix I of CITES. This means that authorities believe this species is now threatened with extinction and only limited trade for scientific or conservation purposes is sanctioned. Governments are also required to obtain appropriate export and import licences.

Cupressoides is made up of the genus name *Cupressus* and Greek *-oides* (like) components meaning ‘cypress-like’.

Virtually on its own this tree ie. in nearly pure stands, managed to cover thousands of acres of often swampy land in South America. But it is under severe threat at the turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries because of past excessive arbitrary felling – and in 1976 all logging of it was officially halted. Unofficially the logging has continued and in order to circumvent the legislation loggers set fire to parts of the wet temperate forest so that they can claim that the trees were dead and could therefore be felled. (The legislation only applied to living plants.) The Government of Chile has now established a National Park to preserve some of the older stands in that Country with possibly better husbandry and fire precautions. It is also being preserved in Argentina’s Parque Nacional Los Alerces.

Despite the fact that these trees grow in rainforest some authorities believe that they depend upon forest fires to regenerate their stands while others think they could be fostered by extreme storm and rain damage or destruction.

The tree was first named by the highly respected Italian Jesuit botanist, Juan Ignazio Molina (1740-1829) who died when Charles Darwin was still at Cambridge and unaware of the existence of HMS *Beagle*. Molina, who spent some time in Chile, was commemorated in 1967 on two Chilean stamps that declared him to be the ‘first scientist of Chile’ and a ‘benefactor of national education’. (Later however Darwin was to name the tree after the English naval officer who opened up the opportunity for him to develop his own enthusiasm for natural history.)

Records have noted how this tree can last for at least 1,000 years. This claim is put in perspective when one notes that in 1993 authorities have been able to cross-date a specimen in Chile as being 3,622 years old. In the course of ascertaining the tree’s age specialists have also been able to reconstruct mean summer temperatures for southern South America and glacial movement in Argentina that has been experienced by the tree during its lifetime.

The hard and durable wood was used for rigging, shingling and general carpentry, as well as for making musical instruments, honey barrels, cigar boxes, pencils and troughs. Also boats were once caulked with fibre from the inner bark.

Alerce was introduced to Britain in 1849 by William Lobb (1809-1864). This Cornishman accompanied his brother Thomas to South America plant-hunting for the English nursery Veitch and Sons and introduced other plants to England at the same time. Today alerce is cultivated primarily as an ornamental tree.