

Fire and Forest

How Do We Compare to Other Forest Areas?

by Chris Kramer

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How many of us have visited a forest outside of Southern California? Many of these have amenities that are very similar to ours, campgrounds, hiking trails, lakes and streams just to name a few. Most all encourage public use for recreational activities by providing access to many areas through both paved and dirt roads that traverse even the most remote areas.

On a recent trip to Truckee, in Northern California I spent a considerable amount of time exploring the backcountry of the Tahoe National Forest (TNF). Now this National Forest is big, it has some 1.2 million acres and is spread over 4 counties. Compare this to our San Bernardino National Forest, which is about 818,000 acres over 2 counties and you see the difference in size between the two.

A couple of things I did notice after a week of enjoying that area were the amount of tree thinning and overgrowth reduction. The Mountain Communities Fire Safe Council (MCFSC) over the years continues to have a lot of interaction and discussion with our local United States Forest Service (USFS) personnel. One topic is their attempts to do more of this thinning of the forest locally. The benefit of these projects and the desired results is evident in the Tahoe National Forest. Granted, this forest is in an area that gets more rain than here, but the entire forest looks a great deal healthier than ours because it is not dense and overgrown. The other noticeable difference was the lack of litter, not only in the backcountry trails and roads but also around campgrounds, parking lots, picnic areas and highways. It felt like visitors and residents in this area respect and are more aware of the surroundings they are in, unlike the sometimes-careless Southern California crowd.

Think about the last time you may have done a hike on the Ernie Maxwell or Deer Springs trail. These are probably two of the most used trails around Idyllwild by visitors. One could fill a daypack with plastic bottles, wrappers, cigarette butts, trash and the like after a weekend of use from these trails. Then there are those who take their dogs and do not pick up after them. Or, they bag it and leave it by the side of the road or trail. Someone explain this one to me!

The other barometer of a big weekend in our forest is the amount of trash alongside the highway and local roads on a Monday morning. Even the locals

are part of this problem. Do you really think that load of cardboard and loose stuff in the back of your truck is **ALL** going to stay there on the way to the Transfer Station?

Thanks to the members of the local Rotary and Idyllwild Cycling for adopting a stretch of Hwy 243. Throughout the year and generally after holidays they can be seen doing trash pick up along the roadway. Another person you may have seen numerous times along the highway is a gentleman on a bicycle with a basket carrying two bags picking up bottles and cans. I've always appreciated his gathering of these things and told my lovely wife "I'm going to buy him lunch someday". While at the dump I saw him and we had a short conversation. I found out that he retired, moved here and said, "this was too nice a place to have bottles and cans all over the side of the road". Thanks for your efforts Jay, hope you enjoyed your lunch.

I think we can all learn something from a visit to another area similar to our community. Our National Forests need to be respected and not abused by the public. And with financial support by our federal legislators the USFS can do the work to maintain and provide a healthy forest that we all can continue to enjoy and live in. Remember, we are all caretakers of the National Forests.