

Photos: Behind the trees lurk a sea of hopelessness

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What one cannot see behind the trees off Elk Valley Road at little known South Bend dirt road is nothing short of harrowing. From obscure roads off Elk Valley Rd like Broad, Eau Clair, National, Madison, Minnesota, Michigan and Iowa roads situated in an area known as The Swamp.

The main artery splits off into many trails which hide scores of folks living in squalid conditions. The area encompasses several illegal encampments. There are dozens of homeless sites hidden behind these trees. All one need do is follow the trash trail along this sad road of despair.

The accumulation of garbage, environmental waste, urine and fecal matter and abandoned vehicles is shocking.

Makeshift remnant homes from RVs in a community of tragic drug abuse, those who suffer from mental illness, alcoholics and criminals exist. These horrific, Third World conditions proliferate among arguably disgusting circumstances; but one does not see this horror because the heavy overgrowth of trees and brush veil this travesty.

The assault situates on both private and public lands overseen by the California Coastal Commission and Department of Fish and Wildlife along with many private property owners.

When Triplicate staff decided to venture into this quagmire, we understood the journey was situated in “dangerous no man’s land” and we knew it was unsafe to walk back into the woods without a Del Norte Sheriff escort.

With Sheriff Garrett Scott, himself escorting our group through a patchwork of trails, what our group observed was beyond shocking, beyond vile, beyond anyone’s imagination. This condition is happening in arguably one of the most breathtaking geographies in America.

The side-by-side picture of magnificent Del Norte County and the disgusting juxtaposed view of just how bad conditions have deteriorated over the last several years are unfathomable and incompatible.

Accompanying us were 5th District Supervisor Dean Wilson, Frank Ormandi whose business, Frank's Heating and Refrigeration is situated near The Swamp area, Dave Markel, concerned citizen and property owner, Doug Westfall of The Crescent City Times and property owner John Wood.

All in our group agreed the explosion of drugs including methamphetamines, fentanyl, cocaine and alcohol have accelerated the deterioration of those suffering from mental illness and the physical destruction of this once tranquil area.

One does not see the degradation because the green barrier of brush and growth separate the two realities. Is the area behind Elk Valley a stand-alone eyesore in Del Norte, out of sight, out of mind?

Not Hardly...

Wherever you observe heavy brush growth and lots of trees to hide the obvious filth, tread lightly. One observes hypodermic needles and human beings suffering from the effects of destructive drugs heretofore mentioned, discarded drug paraphernalia, empty bottles of alcohol, sewage waste and trash... and more trash... and more trash.

Sheriff Scott knows all too well the conditions within The Swamp. "The DNSD can move these folks out of the swamp but to where? Code Enforcement can remove all the garbage one sees here but how can we prevent a re-assault of this beautiful land? Del Norte County needs a shelter to place these folks. Everyone needs to be accountable for their actions."

Supervisor Wilson shared his solution. The former Sheriff said, "Del Norte county absolutely needs a shelter. We support the proposed shelter Our Daily Bread and the proposed pallet homes on Williams Drive. With these very important tools, law enforcement can remove the trespassers and the illegal activities they practice behind the trees and place them in the shelter. It's the first step in taking back our community."

Frank Ormandi said, "Resources are tight. Many of these trees we see must be cut back so our law enforcement can and must patrol and be able to peer back into the woods. We need more patrol officers in our area. Sitting back and doing nothing is not an option."

One might be correct to assume the largest agency in the state and by extension, its 58 counties, is the Department of Health and Human Services. One might also be correct to assume this agency would have some positive impact on managing this human problem of drug addiction in Del Norte County.

John Wood respectfully disagrees. "Sadly, a department which employs 43 percent of an estimated near 400 county staff is losing ground as fast as the endless supply of State funding pours into Del Norte, with unanimous consent agenda approval from the Board of Supervisors.

Assaulted areas like the swamp are expanding," according to property owner Wood. "It's disheartening to observe Health and Human Services enable these folks with all kinds of so-called free benefits which aren't free. We taxpayers pay the bill, while we have to clean up the messes they make on our property. It's just wrong."

Dave Markel inserted his observations. “As long as one does not see behind the trees, all appears to be normal. It’s not normal. The folks who live behind the bushes cost our community dearly and damage private and public property. The intimidation factor and fear of reprisal is real.”

Folks complain. Property owners in this impacted area are powerless to stabilize their properties and remove trespassers who destroy the land on which they squat. The Triplicate receives numerous calls monthly about these intolerable conditions. Watered-down laws which were once felonies are now misdemeanors or infractions. Law Enforcement’s hands are tied, according to Sheriff Scott.

“Behind those trees lies a sea of hopelessness that festers through a constant drizzle of community indifference,” laments Union St. property owner Wood.

The Triplicate will continue to report what’s behind the trees and keep the public apprised on these debilitating conditions in Del Norte County.