

Northern Exposure: Issues affecting Northern Californians

BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

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State rocks Plumas anglers' boat with planned removal of trout from lake

It's a fish-eat-frog world throughout the Sierra Nevada, but Plumas County seems to be the only place celebrating it.

The fish is the brook trout, an eastern native introduced to western waters in the late 1800s. It eats the diminutive native yellow-legged frog, a federal endangered species.

When state officials announced plans to remove the trout from a single Plumas lake to protect the frog's habitat, local fishermen went ballistic. In response to angler angst, editors of the countywide newspaper put "Yellow-legged frog declared extinct" on their wish list for 2015 headlines.

"If the yellow-legged frog disappears, would anyone notice?" they asked. "Does anyone really care?"

Yes, said local environmentalists, who emerged from hibernation with a salvo of letters shaming the editors for hubris. Then they held a rally with amphibian fans wearing frog masks to champion biodiversity.

Lacking a real enemy in the frog, the editors took aim at the usual suspect: government. State officials botched notification of the planned trout removal, they said, and elected officials in Washington failed to consider the economic impacts of listing the frog as endangered. The editors cited cancellation of a local endurance run due to a \$6,000 processing fee to evaluate the event's effect on the frog. "The economic frog damage to our county will eventually be measured in millions of dollars," they grumbled.

Equating local short-term economic costs with the irreversible global cost of species extinction ignores a higher moral imperative, said Darla DeRuiter, environmental studies professor at Feather River College: “Where’s the humility – respect for the diversity of life?”

The next related Plumas celebration may be honoring the editors with a smart-aleck [Darwin Award](#).

Willits seeking new way to back arts

Starving artists are ubiquitous, but in rural areas the effort to support them is particularly daunting. Isolation, funding, volunteer burnout, loss of talent to urban bright lights – how does a back-roads community sustain local art?

The issues have hit home in Willits, a city of 5,000 in the heart of Mendocino County. Over the years it has seen artists come and go: Mona Gnader, Sammy Hagar’s bass player; Green Day drummer Tre Cool. Now its very own Center for the Arts is in jeopardy.

When the commission running the center’s two-story building collapsed, Mayor Bruce Burton established an ad hoc committee to develop new management models. “It’s time for something different – something sustainable,” said June Ruckman, a former arts commissioner and one of a handful of volunteers keeping the lights on.

Rural communities across Northern California have faced similar struggles and come up with solutions unique to their needs, said Caitlin Fitzwater, a spokeswoman for the California Arts Council. Some have formed public-private partnerships, others nonprofit organizations.

The council awarded about \$70,000 to seven rural organizations through a 2014 program to encourage economic development and greater access to the arts. A similar program is being offered this year, Fitzwater said.

To be eligible, organizations have to be nonprofits. “That’s not the panacea everyone thinks it is,” Ruckman said.

She is so confident Willits will create a new process to manage the Arts Center that she has booked shows through 2015: ceramics, photography, steampunk art. “This is a time to move forward,” she said.

Meanwhile, the ad hoc committee has yet to meet.

Rising tide to make billboard fight moot?

The battle of the billboards along Highway 101 appears to be winding down in a wreckage of scenic-area signage and a judge’s ruling.

Last month, Humboldt Superior Court Judge W. Bruce Watson dismissed a case filed by CBS Outdoor Inc. The advertising giant wanted to eliminate a requirement that Caltrans remove billboards along the 8-mile stretch between Eureka and Arcata as part of a safety improvement project.

“It’s a huge victory for scenery,” said Jennifer Kalt, director of Humboldt Baykeeper.

As part of the decades-long conflict over the larger-than-life hamburgers and motel beds looming over the picturesque wetlands bordering Humboldt Bay, the California Coastal Commission directed Caltrans to remove billboards. So far, Caltrans hasn’t removed anything, said Eli Rohl, an agency spokesman.

But somebody has. Vandals wielding battery-powered sawzalls have cut down two of the 18 eyesores. A third one took a face-plant on its own.

Still, it may be premature for the monkey-wrenching Hayduke to take a break. CBS Outdoors has asked the court to review Watson’s decision and may file a challenge.

By then the controversy may be moot: Scientists say rising sea levels will eventually put the current corridor under water. Protecting it from inundation is not part of Caltrans' safety project, Rohl said.

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