

# Trashing Our Public Lands



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

The woods have always been my retreat from the world. As a kid, the woods were the place I went to get away from my grandparents, vegetables, chores, and that loathsome childhood addiction called school.

I have always felt safer and more secure in the woods than I ever felt in the city. The woods have given me more than a fair share of injuries, mostly from my own mind-boggling acts of idiocy, so I can't blame that on the outdoors.

Over the past 5 plus decades, I have hunted and fished on 5 continents, and have had up-close and personal encounters with lions, leopards, buffalo, elephants, mountain lions, and a few of the critters with 2 legs, rather than one leg in each corner, and I have yet to become a blue plate special for a maneater. Statistically, the woods are still a much safer place than life in the city. The city has more ways to stamp your carcass "cancelled" than the woods have. Lately, the city seems to be encroaching into our woods, and in the words of Bob Dylan, "The times they are a changin'."

Montrose seems to have a larger population of transients and homeless than ever before. Tent camps and temporary living set-ups are scattered all around town, and the county. Law enforcement is seriously understaffed to tackle the problem, but they do a great job with what they have. The real problem is that there probably isn't a solution, at least not an easy one.

Many of these homeless people simply have no place to go. Only a small percentage of the transients are here with criminal intentions, but that number is growing. Anyone who frequents the trails closer to town, such as Simms Mesa, has probably witnessed some of the problem.

I spent some time discussing this with Sheriff Gene Lillard,



This is a sampling of what people are doing to our public lands. This needs to stop. (Courtesy photos)

our Montrose County Sheriff who is also an outdoorsman, and he made me aware of some of the problems.

"The Montrose County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) has received numerous complaints from our citizens that have visited areas of our county for outdoor recreation and have been very upset by what they have seen. There are areas where homeless people have been staying for a lengthy period of time, and then leaving the area completely trashed. The amount of trash and destruction left behind by these people is beyond comprehension."

"While on patrol, our deputies have encountered hypodermic needles, endless amounts of plastic, wood, scrap metal, campers, burned out campers, cars, trash bags full of hazardous waste, and human waste. We have also found rock walls being built and stacked up to build shelters using native rocks that were intentionally displaced and left intentionally. Cedar trees, sage brush, and native plants and shrubbery completely destroyed by squatters either by fire or simply cut down and left on the ground, are visible

in several of these areas," said Sheriff Lillard.

These homeless camps in areas of Simms Mesa, Transfer Road, Dave Wood Road, the Uncompahgre River corridor north and south of town, and at least a half dozen other areas. The Sheriff went on to tell me, "I take this very personally too. These beautiful areas belong to all of us. We all live, work and play in these areas, and seeing this land trashed by inconsiderate individuals strikes me to the core. We must get this cleaned up and stopped."

Sheriff Lillard and Commander Ty Cox, also of the MCSO, recently met with BLM ranger Sam Flournoy, Sheriff Mark Taylor of Delta County, and Deputy Chief Tim Cox of the Montrose Police Department to discuss the issues that are also occurring in the Montrose City limits, Montrose County, BLM lands, and Delta County. Together, they are documenting the sites in question, establishing the amount of damage, and what will be required to clean it up.

One option being floated around is to organize a volunteer clean-up crew to start the lengthy cleaning

process and try and return the affected lands to their native state. The team has also been informed that West End, Paradox, Nucla, Naturita, and Redvale, have all experienced similar problems on their public, and sometimes on private lands. It is expected that these areas will most likely take part in any clean-up efforts.

I also spent some time with Ty Cox, a close friend of mine who is also an avid outdoorsman and serves as Patrol Commander for the MCSO. I Commander Cox what a citizen should do, in the event they encounter one of these trashed areas. He said, "I would recommend a citizen report any trashed out camp or overall littering as soon as possible by contacting WestCo Dispatch at 970-249-9110. WestCo will know which agency to dispatch out based off the location. If the reporting party has the means to do so, it would be great if they could give a detailed location and possibly GPS coordinates to the camp."

One of the things that always concerns me is the possibility of a confrontation with one of the offending individuals. When you are up in the public lands,

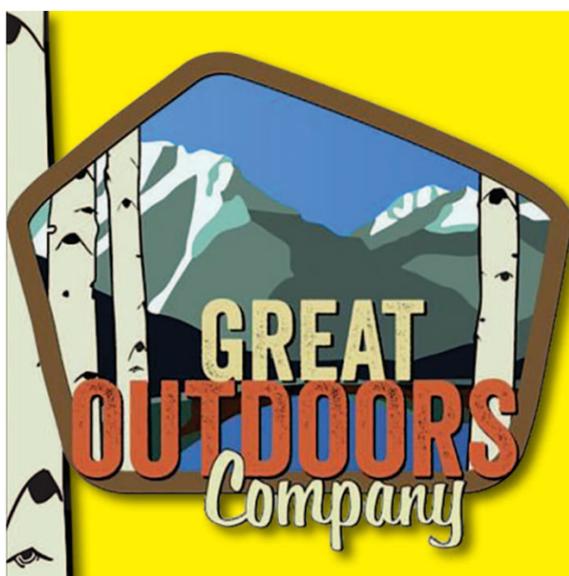
a long way from help, things can turn dicey pretty quickly. I asked Commander Cox what an individual should do in such a situation, and he stated, "While out recreating and a citizen becomes involved in a confrontation, we kindly ask that they remove themselves from the situation and contact law enforcement right away if they feel a crime has been committed or about to be committed. If a citizen observes a confrontation, but isn't involved, we just ask that they become a good witness and provide WestCo Dispatch with detailed information to better equip responding law enforcement officers with a good understanding of the situation they are responding to. If a citizen is able to safely provide detailed information of the involved parties and/or vehicle descriptions (license plate number) without inserting themselves or putting themselves in harm's way that is also very helpful."

This problem belongs to all of us. The MCSO and the BLM have had several meetings and have agreed to make more of a presence in our lands to enforce littering, camping violations, and other crimes.

They are actively organizing cleanup efforts to get these lands back to their native state. In the near future, they may be reaching out to our citizens seeking volunteers who may wish to help with these efforts to get our BLM lands back to the way they are supposed to be.

Sheriff Lillard, Commander Cox, and I all agree that it is very disheartening to see people not respecting our public lands, and all of us recreate in these areas frequently with our families. We need to find a solution to the cause of this problem and be sure it stops immediately.

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