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Articles highlight the contrast between art and reality on oak woodlands

Stephen J. Donoviel 13 hrs ago

MORE INFORMATION

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Letter understated cost of Walt Ranch

Finally, a move in the right direction?

Like others, two of the front-page articles in the Aug. 17 editic related to Napa Valley's oak woodlands caught my attention. One concerned "The Memory of a Tree" ("Oak-themed 'Memory of a Tree' mural to adorn Yountville gateway"), about the Yountville residents' wise choice to use the design by artists Sofia Lacin and Hennessy Christophel for murals to grace the Highway 29 underpass and the authorities for providing the resources to complete them.

It appears the artists' conceptual framework recognizes the history and significance of the mighty oaks to Napa Valley as

well as their markedly diminishing numbers. This will, I hope, remind all of us, residents and passing tourists alike, of the significant role these disappearing giants play in our well-being by filtering the water we drink and the air we breathe as well as lending beauty to our surroundings.

The second article ("City of Napa, Walt Ranch reach agreement on water quality") centered around one of the major causes of the ongoing and increasing diminution of the oak woodlands, namely destruction/clear-cutting of significant numbers of trees (think filters) to make way for various entrepreneurial projects, e.g., the Walt Ranch (an operation reportedly held by Hall Brambletree Associates from Texas), which is not the only project, but certainly one, if not the biggest due to its size and widespread destruction/alteration of all or at least most aspects of the environment across the huge property.

It seems there is general agreement that the watersheds, particularly the Milliken, which delivers water to the residents of Napa city that is described as "pristine" (water currently being filtered by the mighty oak and other vegetation, the composition and configuration of the geological environment and relative absence of impact of man-generated pollutants), may be negatively impacted if Walt Ranch is allowed to proceed. The article references prior documents that indicate that to maintain the quality of the city water supply fouled by the project, filters costing an estimated \$20 million would be necessary and the expense would be passed on to existing water customers.

Reportedly, Walt Ranch officials balked at picking up the tab. It's not clear if this would be a one-time expense or a periodic necessity like replacing the filter on a Brita home filter. For whatever reason, these details/concerns were dropped and city officials agreed to sign off on the project if the county

includes requirements that Walt Ranch "monitor runoff water at nine locations and take steps to deal with problems that might arise."

I'm sorry but this seems like a very poor deal for the environment and everyone in it, except those directly connected to the Walt Ranch, because once the geology is disturbed and the tens of thousands of trees are destroyed, there is no going back to nature's filtration systems (not for generations to come) and residents are left with the bill for the filters.

If anyone is interested in seeing the speciousness of the argument that planting saplings (welcome as they are) will mitigate clear-cutting of mature oaks, they can judge for themselves by walking parts of our new bike path, or wander along the Yountville drainage collector outfalls where 10 to 15 years ago county flood control officials planted filling-in saplings along the banks. While they appear to be doing well, having been planted on creek banks, I think no one would argue that they even come close to approaching the size or filtering/soil stabilizing/shade capacity of a mature oak.

Another issue of significant concern, that of the pumping of hundreds of millions of gallons of water from our aquifers, was brought into sharp focus by an article in the August volume of National Geographic titled "To the Last Drop" authored by Laura Parker. The article chronicles in poignant fashion the draining of what is said to be North America's largest aquifer, the Ogallala that spans several central states. Reasons she identifies include the farmers' expansionistic over-farming in the quest for more income (an example, of what I think some politicians refer to as "growth" when occurring with businesses, communities, states, etc.), their unwillingness to self-regulate the amount of water they were pumping, even

with the knowledge that, despite rain/snow fall of 50 to 100 percent above average, the aquifer did not recharge to previous levels and wells ran dry, as well as their officials' unwillingness to impose limits.

Maybe Napa County and the rest of the state -- certainly the Central Valley, which is already sinking -- have reached the tipping point where too much of a good thing leads to a disaster like that in the states served by the Ogallala aquifer. As a friend recently queried, "When is enough enough?" If subscribers have not read Ms. Parker's article, perhaps you can find the time to do so and hopefully we will treat "Yountville Tree Mural" with more respect and care than we have been doing with the real ones.

Stephen J. Donoviel

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