

Trashing ourselves

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by Damon Hodge

An examination of litter, litterers and the destruction of our home



Illustration by Dave Savage

It must've been one colossal party. Or a series of smaller, Dionysian ones. From the looks of the orgiastic assemblage of trash—like what you might find in the parking lot after a tailgate party at a football game—this mountain range in the east Valley has hosted hundreds, maybe thousands of planned and impromptu get-togethers over the last 10-15 years. Enough stuff here to fill an army of Dumpsters. Hennessy bottles. Snack wrappers. Shell casings. The occasional tire. Some of the beer cases (Corona is a favorite among revelers) have been here so long that they dissolve on contact. A full can of paint thinner clogs a sewage hole. Nearby is a pile of half-full paint cans and dried-out markers, undoubtedly used to defile a kiosk with curse words and gang monikers. Crickets have turned Styrofoam containers that once held take-out food into dwellings. More than a few Gatorade bottles contain piss-yellow liquid. An empty 12-can box of Budweiser sits in the ditch. In the same ditch, a no-littering sign has been uprooted. Once straight, the top part (which reads, "This desert cleanup effort is being supported by William Bailey Middle School") is now curved from pummeling.

At the foot of Frenchman Mountain is an interpretive panel that sits on a cinder-block pillar (vandals destroyed the steel post) and is made of coarse crystalline diorite ("black granite") from southern India. It explains the significance of this place, which sits at the nexus of urbanity—on Lake Mead Boulevard about a half mile east of Hollywood; there's a Walgreens down the street—and local history. The panel attempts to explain the geologic anomaly 30 yards away. Only it can't. It's been graffitied and marked up. Someone has bashed out a chunk of the inscription. So Doug Joslin, project manager for Southern Nevada Take Pride in America, an initiative of UNLV's Public Lands Institute, fills in the historical blanks.

Check out the striations in the rock. Younger rock (sandy brown) overlays older formations (darker brown, in the vein of tree bark). The contrasting colors represent differing compositions of fossils, minerals and other elements. That bottom layer formed near the Earth's core 1.7 billion years ago, rose to the earth's surface 500 million years ago and was then covered—like frosting on lumpy cake—by newer sedimentary layers of sandstone and limestone.

The Great Unconformity (so named by Clarence Dutton in his 1882 book *Tertiary History of the Grand Cañon District*) represents the contact between the Precambrian and Cambrian

ages, a gap of 1.2 billion years, nearly a fourth of the world's age. Says Joslin: "The only other place in America with this geological distinction is the Grand Canyon."

Up a hilly ridge is another interpretive panel. To get to it, you must sidestep mounds of glass. So many shards that, if glued together, they could form a couple dozen life-size mirrors. Joslin's perturbed. We've driven from Government Wash at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area and back and seen heaps of trash. A place this grand, this historical, this protected (by the federal government) deserves better, he says. "The Great Unconformity is a focal point of Las Vegas history, culture, pride and research."

And a focal point for litter, too. Over the years, it's become a big geological Dumpster, the final resting place for beer cans and liquor bottles, dilapidated couches and used condoms, flat tires and old mattresses, ratty clothes and unwanted furniture, broken appliances and animal refuse, commercial trash and burnt-out cars. Much the same can be said for Southern Nevada's 7 million acres of public lands, terrain that covers desert, wilderness, mountains, canyons and Lake Mead.

Weeks ago, a Bureau of Land Management employee taking a break at Frenchman Mountain caught a contractor dumping concrete, tile, plumbing fixtures, sheet rock and two-by-fours. "He didn't think he was doing anything wrong," the employee says, requesting anonymity because he's not allowed to speak for the agency.

"I want to put picnic tables, a Port-a-Potty, improved trails, everything here. But I can't spend taxpayer money if this stuff is going to happen. If you were to go up in a helicopter and look down on Vegas, we're surrounded by a ring of trash. People here don't care."

That's frustration talking.

It's not entirely true. Last year, state and federal employees and volunteers removed more than 70 tons of trash from Government Wash near Lake Mead. During fiscal year 2006, volunteers cleared 126 tons of trash from public lands. If placed in boxes three feet high, wide and deep and stacked atop one another, refuse picked up by Don't Trash Nevada in three years would reach 2,679 feet, more than 2 1/2 times taller than the Stratosphere.

Last year, the Southern Nevada Health District's solid waste management program received 1,825 illegal-dumping complaints; 311 cases were presented to the hearing officer for adjudication and \$692,160 in penalties levied.

So the daunting task of cleaning up behind litterers is being countered by an energetic strike force of federal officials and volunteers (more than 3,000 in the databases of environmental groups). So far this year, Don't Trash Nevada volunteers have done 25 cleanups and removed 472 cubic yards of waste.

But the BLM employee's frustration isn't off-base. Perhaps our treatment of public lands is somehow reflective of how many of us view the Valley. We're very much a community of nomads—thousands moving in, thousands moving out. Neighborhoods aren't designed for communal interaction. Many of us overlook our natural resources (when was the last time you hiked Red Rock?). Relationships can be difficult to establish; connections even harder. As more people move here, expanding the pool of potential litterers, and as we struggle to create a sense of community, might we be forever be one step behind?

The litterer's psyche

So who's littering? Nearly everybody, if Francis McAndrew's oft-cited 1993 book *Environmental Psychology* is to be believed. Women, youth, rural dwellers and people who live alone, he says, litter more than men, seniors, urban dwellers and multiperson households. Picnickers, hunters, fishermen, campers, motorboaters, water skiers, careless pedestrians, motorists, truck drivers and construction and loading-dock workers are primary sources of litter.

As Lake Mead's water level continues to recede due to drought, the volunteer program manager for Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Nancy Bernhard, says more debris dumped by boaters is popping up. Everything from clothes to anchors. Joslin suspects the bulk of litter at Frenchman Mountain comes from young men ages 18-24.

Why do we litter? Of the litterer's psyche, musician and environmentalist Alan Tower wrote: "The word litter has a light touch to it. It sounds like glitter—airy and inconsequential.

"Is that how it is for cigarette smokers who throw butts down on beaches and streets?" Tower wrote. "That somehow a cigarette is not a piece of trash, but can be tossed anywhere? Because it's paper and cured leaves it will break down and become nontrash at some point? It seems more likely that folks who toss butts on the beach, who throw down butts on shiny building floors, grinding them with their foot, are operating from the same state of mind as that of people who toss trash out of cars.

"What is the littering psyche about? Sometimes it seems so simple, but then I realize that I may not understand the full depth of the issue. For example, for a long time the world overpopulation issue seemed fairly clear to me. It was simply a matter of too many humans overtaxing resources. I now see the problem as much more complex. In some countries high birth rates are mandatory for family survival. Lack of health care and safe water means high death rates for children. Could littering be like this? Something I'm missing from my privileged position? You might think that people in a place like Costa Rica have a different littering mind than we do. Not really. Trashing out the place crosses all cultures and economic stations in life."

Can we stop it? Through partnerships with the school district and nonprofits, UNLV's Public Land Institute takes inner-city students out of their neighborhoods and onto public lands—to the desert, Lake Mead and wildlife refuges. For some of them, Joslin says, it's the first time they've ever experienced nature. Teaching kids early, he says, is the preventive maintenance. "Most people don't litter. But when one person dumps three truckloads of trash on public land or in a vacant lot, that makes up for it. One 15-year-old kid can tag up Red Rock. That creates the psychology and perception that we, as a community, don't care about our public places, even though the vandalism, or litter, is the act of one person or a small minority of people."

Effects of trash

McAndrew cites five factors that contribute to litter: lax laws and enforcement; a feeling of entitlement; poor education; litter begets litter; apathy.

My problem is apathy. If I toss something into the garbage and miss, I'll pick it up—if someone's looking. I tend to toss used Kleenex out the window. Something about stuffing snot rags in my ashtray grosses me out.

I suspect that, like me, the vast majority of periodic litterers (by this, I'm referring to people who may toss a toothpick on the ground, heave a cigarette butt out the window) rationalize their behavior. We're not in the same category as illegal dumpers. And ignorance of both the

law and the environmental effects of litter is a good defense, in our minds. It's okay because we didn't know candy wrappers could potentially block washes, channels and other flood-control devices, making areas more susceptible to flooding. Will we stop now? Maybe.

Similarly, I doubt the people dumping appliances know that they can release chlorofluorocarbons to the environment. Or that cigarette butts clog up storm drains leading to Lake Mead. Or that banana peels and apple cores, stuff people toss because it's biodegradable, can take two years to decompose. Or that plastic bags, the scourge of many vacant lots around the Valley, have a 10-year life. Aluminum cans can last 500 years, and plastic bottles (30 percent of litter), Styrofoam and glass bottles can last forever. Or that sewer-dwelling mice and mosquitoes feed on litter, increasing the risk of outbreaks of hantavirus and encephalitis, respectively. Or that several tortoises have died after eating balloons with red lettering on them (they're sensitive to red light).

Only dedicated volunteers, staunch environmentalists and the people paid to know this stuff know this stuff. The UNLV Public Lands Institute shares a building in the middle of the campus with the Black Mountain Institute. Among the institute's current pursuits are analyzing littering and dumping fines and regulations, building a database of volunteers (2,800 and counting), serving as a research and educational resource for the four federal entities that maintain public lands, strategizing with 46 public and private partners on cleanups and education and using technology to attack illegal dumping. When the agencies (National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service) call, Executive Director Peggy Rees and her staff of 40 spring into action, conducting research.

If the institute has a sixth unwritten precept, Rees says, it's establishing (for many) and reinvigorating (for some) a connection to the environment. You don't have to be a native Las Vegas to practice environmental stewardship around here. "We want to educate people to respect the outdoors, to get them connected to the outdoors. For many people, an emotional connection to the land is missing. We have wonderful public lands that we must take care of or we will lose them."

Ownership vs. belonging

Is it possible to invest in something without owning it? Yes. Buy enough shares in a publicly traded company and you have a voice in how it runs, even if the CEO doesn't listen to you. Tens of millions find in Facebook and MySpace a sense of belonging, of kinship—they abide by etiquette and keep each other in check.

So is a sense of belonging a condition of ownership? If you feel attached to this community, are you more likely to engage in positive pursuits—voting, volunteering and stopping to pick up litter? Does a feeling of community ownership develop organically over time, or is it an outgrowth of investing time, money and resources? Which of these—sense of belonging, feeling of community ownership—is more important?

"People seem to take a long time to call Vegas home, unless they were born here," says Joslin, who mimics New York and Boston accents to prove a point about hometown pride. "It's hard to look at the city, as it's growing so fast, and say that there's a sense of home here. For many people it just doesn't have that home vibe. What we're experiencing with litter is not dissimilar from what other cities went through or are going through. This is a young town, and these are some of the growing pains."

Where that leaves me, I'm unsure. Having grown up here and returned after college, I feel both a sense of belonging to and ownership of this Valley. I can't say I've been negatively influenced by parents or peers. I can't recall seeing anyone litter. But I've always done it. Mostly small stuff. I try to be covert with it. Usually when the roads or the freeways are empty. So there's a disconnect somewhere, some synapse in my brain that isn't firing. I perused an environmental toxicology report out of California that found high levels of lead in the wrappers of more than 110 varieties of candy, most of them imported from Mexico. That didn't stop me from eating candy—or tossing the wrappers.

The Journal of Environmental Psychology examined litter behavior on campus in 2004 studies by James H. Liu and Chris G. Sibley from the school of psychology at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand. Being on campus has little effect on littering attitudes, the first study found. Ashtrays and trash cans were added in the second study. Litter declined 64 percent, but there was no corresponding change in the attitudes toward it. In essence, people saw the receptacles and used them. "Results supported an environmental perspective in which the structure of the physical environment," Liu and Sibley wrote, "rather than group-based social representations and attitudes, moderated the way in which littering behavior was performed."

Modifying the environment doesn't always work. Vandals have destroyed receptacles at Frenchman Mountain. I can see a receptacle. Whether I use it depends on how much I have to throw away. Is littering of a piece with our other flagrantly unenvironmental practices—the way we use 250 gallons of water a day, etc.? Connecting littering to our other detrimental behaviors might firm up the broader context.

"It's a challenge keeping a handle on this," Bernhard says. "If we don't, we'll have to explore charging entrance fees. This cuts down on vandalism and crime, but it also hurts visitation. We had between 9 million and 10 million visits last year. We can start charging fees or putting fences up, but we shouldn't have to. People should be able to enjoy our public lands."

I ask Joslin if part of the problem, my problem, is that litter isn't high on the civic agenda.

"A lot of people don't want to see litter," Joslin says. "People don't want to admit that they are contributing to a problem. Who's to say what should be addressed first? Is litter worse than mental health? I can't say that. It can have an effect on the environment, which can have an effect on public health. Is litter worse than the foreclosure crisis? I can't say that. But I can say that it plays a real role in real estate. If there's an empty lot across the street from your house, you might not get the asking price you want. Plus, it takes money to clean up eyesores, and that can have an effect on property values in your neighborhood."

Changing minds, habits

Alan O'Neill is executive director of the nonprofit Outside Las Vegas Foundation. He says there are as many reasons as there are people. The litterer's demographic is a snapshot of America. Sophisticated people do it, he says. "People who drive Mercedes Benzes throw their cigarette butts out of the window." Best we can hope for, he says, is to change mind-sets. "In schools, kids are told, 'Don't do drugs,' but they don't get messages about not littering. We must educate the newcomers and connect/reconnect the long-timers. More people moved here in the past 10 years than lived here previously. Many of them came from places where there was no desert climate. We have 7 million acres of federal land. We have eight congressionally designated areas. There's no other place in the country like this. We should be proud and protective. When's the last time you saw litter in a casino?"

Back near the Great Unconformity, Joslin and I are driving over rocky terrain. A teacher and his students are on the hillside pocked with glass. Joslin's happy to see that—maybe they'll see the effects of litter close up. Behaviors will change when the message sinks in. Now if he could only divine the motivations of the litterers who treat public lands like, well, trash. Research notes that younger people tend to do the bulk of the littering. But Joslin isn't so sure. Maybe it's accurate, he says, or maybe they're simply more forthcoming. "These aren't third-graders driving these pick-ups and dumping couches."

I visit the Great Unconformity one last time, by myself. I've changed my mind-set about litter. Little stuff adds up. Who's to say my soiled Kleenex or empty candy wrapper isn't in some wash or been eaten by a sewer rat? Unlike before, today it stinks to high heaven up here. Smells just like a dump. Flies have swarmed a half-eaten Big Mac that's been placed on the panel nearest the road. A few turn their attention to me. Shooing them away is fruitless. I walk up the rocks. Crickets leap out of the way. The stench intensifies. I bump into a BLM employee, and we chat as a car pulls into the gravel. The driver sits there, eating. I watch him. I alternate between looking at a magazine and watching him. The BLM employee watches, too. We both sense he's got something to dump. We both stare. He leaves. When the roads are empty and no one's watching me, I wonder if I will pass the test.

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DO SOMETHING

Cultural Site Stewardship

publiclands.unlv.edu/cssp.htm

Specially trained volunteers monitor and protect sensitive sites.

Get Outdoors Nevada

www.getoutdoorsnevada.org

Trains volunteers to assist the four federal land-management agencies.

Outside Las Vegas Foundation

www.outsidelasvegas.org

Protects and revitalizes park sites, creates trails, produces publications.

Take Pride in America

publiclands.unlv.edu/takepride.htm

Coordinates anti-litter initiative; includes cleanups and work on strengthening anti-litter and anti-dumping regulations and punishments.

Recycling

www.southernnevadahealthdistrict.org/environmental_health/solid_waste/recycling_opportunities.htm

Links to 15 companies that recycle aluminum, appliances, auto batteries, cardboard, electronics, ink cartridges, magazines, newspapers, paper, plastic pallets and scrap metal.

www.rbrc.org/call2recycle/dropoff/index.php

The Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corporation recycles old cell phones and used portable, rechargeable batteries. Check the website to find drop-off locations in your area.