



Photo by Taylor Flynn

Aspens prevail along the Rainbow Trail at the Taylor Creek Visitor Center.

Aspen loss a major concern for USFS

By Charles Ferris

The U.S. Forest Service Visitor Center on Emerald Bay Road is bordered by Taylor Creek on the north side, and the Tallac Historic Estates on the south side. The entire area is drenched in history, accompanied by an exquisite spread of trees, bushes, ground covers, and that big lake

we are all constantly in awe of.

It's a very busy place from opening day in spring, right up till closing day in autumn. Tourists flock to it to find out more about the area and to take a moment to simply bask in the wonder of Tahoe. Locals do their share of showing up too, year-round.

Part of the visitors' center, aside from all the information,

maps and books inside, is the system of trails with overlooks of Taylor Creek, a small amphitheater, and the Rainbow Trail. What a trail it is.

The trail winds through an area that runs into Taylor Creek as it flows to Lake Tahoe. A favorite of families, a must-see for visitors, often wandered through by locals and anyone who visits on a regular basis, the trail is spotted with some beautiful signage that explains how the meadow that Taylor creek runs through works, what's there, and how it benefits the lake.

Richly scattered throughout the area are aspen trees. From spring, when they begin to leaf out with that aspen green color, through late summer when the leaves begin to take on a more silver-gray hue, to autumn, when they burst into brilliant reds, yellows, oranges, and finally into winter, when the aspens are a silver white, sticking out of the snow, gorgeous as ever. Truly a year-round basket of beauty.

One of the signs on the Rainbow Trail is relatively new. Beautifully designed as it is, the information on it is more than a bit disturbing: "Aspen Decline" is at the top of the sign.

Aspen decline? The information on the sign spells out an issue in the Tahoe Basin that is affecting the aspen stands around the lake. USFS units here and in Nevada are involved in the effort to preserve the aspen; the Tahoe, El Dorado, and Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forests all have

specialists who are aware of the problem.

The probability is that most of the visitors to Tahoe and year-round residents have never heard of aspen decline. Unless, of course, a trip through the Rainbow Trail at the Visitors Center was enjoyed. That sign about the aspens is hard to miss. A bit jarring, actually.

In the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, Stephanie Coppeto is the lead on the Aspen Community Restoration project. The U.S. Forest Service is seriously concerned. Hard to imagine the area without the aspens we now enjoy.

In 2000, the U.S. Department of Agriculture launched the Lake Tahoe Watershed Assessment. Aspen stands were identified as "Ecologically Significant Watershed Areas." The aspens are not only rich in ecological value, but according to the study, relatively scarce on the landscape, covering only 0.5 percent of land area in the basin.

Because of that study, from 2002 to 2007, the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit worked on what is called the Aspen Mapping and Condition Assessment Project. The intent of the project was to better understand several issues within the basin that put aspens at risk. This wasn't a simple "walk in the park" and count the pretty trees outing.

For those five years, crews visited and mapped aspen stands around the lake. The effort meant

some long hikes into the forest, more than once. They had to know what was there and what shape things were in before they could begin to understand the problem and start a program to preserve the aspens. All of the trees, conifers and aspens, soil types, density of trees, lay of the land, and more, were included in the studies.

The result? A large percentage of the aspen stands were found to be at moderate, high, or at highest risk of loss. Simply put, that's the probability that an aspen stand may not "persist on the landscape." Translation: they could be lost, gone, disappear. Reasons? Conifer encroachment and lack of aspen regeneration are cited.

After two years of working with the data, in 2009 they developed the Aspen Community Restoration Project, an effort that continues to this day.

Any program that involves anything in the Tahoe Basin is complicated. Throw in the watershed and forest, and things become a delicate balance of risk and reward. Unintended consequences and Murphy's Law have to be considered, and that's enough to stretch anyone's brain.

Coppeto points out that although aspen are not her area of expertise, in the seven years she has managed the project, she has become passionate about them. That passion comes through loud and clear when she describes what

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Only one item, OK two, on 2018 “to do” list

Finally! The new year has arrived and I’m thrilled because I spent much of last year trying to remember what I’m supposed to be doing. It’s frustrating to wind up at the refrigerator or my workplace and wonder, “Why am I here?” At home, my dogs take blatant advantage of the situation and nudge me in the direction of their food bowls. But when I’m out in public, the only nudging I get is from the post office parking lot sing-for-cash-cowboy and Safeway’s flock of ducks blocking my exit until I relinquish the loaf of bread I just purchased.

I assure you, I’m a motivated person who accepts the responsibility of completing tasks – if I can remember them. But I approach tasks the way I approach housework, roaming in circles until I bump into something that needs fixing.

Although this method of “bump and fix” works, it can leave you out of gas, stranded in a parking lot with a bag of lettuce for dinner, ducks pecking the bread crumbs at your feet or a

post office cowboy serenading you for your stamp money.

So, after washing the duck poop off my shoes, I’ve decided to make a New Year’s resolution to write a daily “To-Do” list. I Googled “How to Make a To-Do List,” and the internet warns list-makers to “remain relaxed” because “all of your commitments, obligations and projects may cloud your perception.” My perception is normally in a deep, foggy, no fly zone, so I heeded this advice carefully. I did 30 seconds of thoughtful introspection, then took a relaxing break to consume a bag of Fritos and a super-sized Frappuccino.

Here’s my new To-Do List:
1. Go to the DMV to renew driver’s license.

List in hand, I drove straight to the DMV, which is... WHERE? I asked my BFF, Siri, and she told me to “walk 15 steps in any direction.”

I walked into the County of El Dorado building where a man



Tahoe Trish

By
Trish Tomer

was screaming at the clerk, “Give YOU 35 dollars??? You’re supposed to give ME 35 dollars!” so I knew I was close.

I turned and walked 15 feet in the opposite direction, entering the DMV, more commonly known as the “Death Zone.”

It is a well-known secret that although the DMV is staffed by thousands, only one employee is allowed to speak at a time. And that employee guides you through the process with minimal word prompts and elaborate hand gestures, most of which are not obscene.

I immediately noticed the lady at the front of the line was having difficulty believing she was a citizen of Earth and therefore in

need of a California driver’s license, when in truth, she resides on Planet Loopy. The Ms. DMV repeatedly droned, “You are now in the state of California...” until the entire line fell into a coma. However, once Princess Wingnut was pointed out the door, presumably in the direction of her launch pad, the line moved quickly. Next up, I carefully explained that I had come to renew my driver’s license, to which Ms. DMV even more carefully explained, “Get a number and take a seat against the wall.”

Being occasionally semi-obedient, I did as I was instructed. But since I am a newly minted list-maker, I made a list of complaints and texted them to my husband:

“Oh no! I’m Number 60!”

“And they’re on Number 2.”

“Am I sitting against the correct wall? There are FOUR of them.”

“No signs of life in the crowd.”

“My mistake. I’m in the DMV Wax Museum.”

“Amazing! DMV employees can sleep while standing.”

“This resembles Temple Grandin’s ‘no-panic’ cattle chute to the slaughter house.”

“That reminds me. I’m starving. Can you bring me a hamburger?”

“Make that a veggie-burger.”

“Everyone in here is either angry or catatonic. Just like Disneyland without the churros.”

“Will you bring me a churro?”

“Bring extra. We’ve gone 13 consecutive minutes without food.”

“You can continue to ignore me, but you’ll never do it better than the DMV.”

“Good news! Now serving customer Number 52! Thankfully, some of the older ones expired while waiting.”

“They called my number!”

“The DMV Lady is telling me I HAVE to mark the Organ Donation box!”

“Is she going to take them NOW?”

Recognizing the value of a ‘To-Do List’, I’m working on another one:

1. Buy the DMV Churros and an Espresso machine.

“Aspens”

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is happening to the aspens.

“Decline,” according to Coppeto, isn’t a term they use; instead, she says, “we use the term ‘loss’ when describing what is happening to the aspen...when I think of the threats facing aspen, and the consequences, the word that resonates most with me is loss. If aspen are dying and also not regenerating, we are losing them. Fundamentally, we are losing the trees.”

In addition to losing the trees, she points out that we are also “losing their value to wildlife, associated herbaceous vegetation, and soil processes. We are losing the cultural artifacts carved into them, we are losing the scenic value the trees contribute to our fall landscapes, we are also losing the peaceful and reassuring quality they can fill viewers with, fall after fall.”

Echoing those statements, Chuck Lofland, USFS, says much the same thing. Aspen stands are very productive wildlife habitat, filter rainwater and snowmelt, have been in Tahoe for a very long time and are culturally significant as well. In short, they are an important part of the landscape.

Aspens are sun-lovers, classified as



shade intolerant. Cut the sun out and they don’t do so well. The problem in the Tahoe Basin is conifer encroachment into the meadows where aspen thrive. Over time, the conifers outgrow the aspen. The conifer “overstory” (or highest layer of vegetation in a forest, usually forming the canopy) shades the aspens and the aspens start to die off.

Long ago, fire kept the forest relatively cleaned out. Aspens regenerate fairly well after low intensity fires. In an aspen grove, those fires killed off young conifers, the aspens tolerated the fires, and sent out rhizomes that produced new aspens. Simple, worked well. These days, fires are high-intensity episodes, which doesn’t work well at all.

Reducing the overstory, cutting trees that are shading aspens, takes a mountain of

work in the Tahoe Basin. Controlled burns present even bigger mountains. Most of the work of thinning out the conifers is done by skilled hand crews.

Return trips to continue the thinning are part of the effort. Mechanical means, big equipment, present multiple problems. Some stands are only reached by long hikes as no roads lead to them and none are going to.

Getting rid of the cut trees and debris is part of the problem as well. There are no mills close by to sell the trees to, which would offset the cost of the program. There’s a limited amount of forest floor to stack all the debris, and burning stacked piles has to be done carefully to protect not only the surrounding aspens, but to keep the forest from exploding, a constant worry in Tahoe.

The efforts of the USFS in the Lake Tahoe Basin are an attempt to preserve as many aspen stands as possible as well as to reintroduce disturbances, which occurred naturally long ago, that favor aspen success.

What they want are aspen stands that have a high ratio of aspen to conifers. Aspen would dominate the upper canopy and would persist on their own, for “as long as possible without more intervention.” There is no one-time, one-size-fits-all fix for the aspens. They naturally coexist with conifers, and multiple visits over multiple years are required to establish a balance.

All of this work in the Basin requires solid funding. The goal is that the funding part of the equation will continue, and the work that secures the funding is ongoing. It’s another aspect of making sure the aspens survive.

None of this is simple. All of it is incredibly complex and important. With the continued work done by Coppeto, her crew and others, the aspens will thrive. Hopefully, we will continue to enjoy them far into the future.

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