

On the hidden side of graffiti

Crime & Criminals - Graffiti
Youth program focuses on restoring community

By MICHAEL SEVILLE
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

PP
12-14-03

APTOS — Everyone knows of the unsightly and costly effects of graffiti and how it can lead to gang confrontations or other illegal activity. But what most people do not think of when looking at a colorful display on a wall or sign is that this type of activity inevitably leads to environmentally damaging circumstances.

Whether it be latex paint, empty spray paint cans or beer bottles and food wrappers left behind, the litter and disregard for the surrounding environment is a problem that needs to be addressed — and it is.

See GRAFFITI, page 6



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Rebecca Supplee, a registered environmental health specialist for the county of Santa Cruz, navigates the waters of Trout Gulch in Aptos Thursday during a field trip put on by the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office to determine the extent of environmental hazards of tagging in the creekbed.

GRAFFITI

From page 1

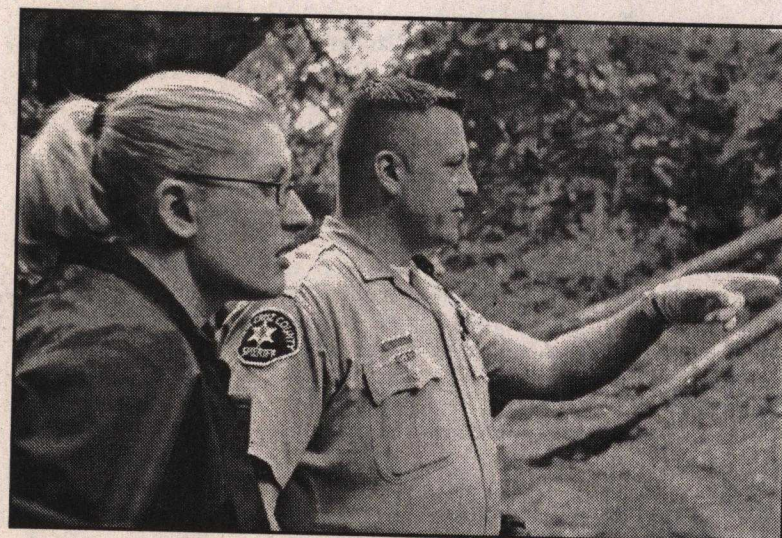
On Thursday, a diverse team of law enforcement, state and county environmental officials, along with probation and youth correctional personnel, gathered alongside the railroad line that slices through Aptos.

Walking along the tracks towards and immediately over Trout Gulch, one sees a hidden paradise for graffiti taggers. With culverts lining the creek as it meanders toward the ocean, the flat walls provide an optimum place for youngsters to practice the tricks of their trade.

"The railroad provides easy access and an exit," Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Deputy Steve Watson said. "Add in the flat surfaces and the secluded nature of this particular site, and you get a prime place for them to practice their specific tags."

Ascending down a steep trail, every flat surface that is reachable is covered in indecipherable writing to the untrained eye. But to taggers and those who follow their trends, the sharp angles that form words and slogans represent respect, recognition and superiority.

"People do this for political and ideological reasons and also for gang stature," Watson said. "But most of the individuals around this county do it for the rush and for the sense that they belong to some-



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Santa Cruz County Sheriff's deputies April Murray and Steve Watson inspect graffiti tagging Thursday along Trout Gulch in Aptos, where paint canisters, chemicals and litter have become a serious environmental concern.

thing. Though they could be classified as gang members due to some of their activities, they are not, for the most part, part of the large violent gangs that occupy some other areas of the country."

Rebecca Supplee, an environmental health officer with Santa Cruz County, wore large rubber boots and had gloves ready to collect all the trash and containers she could find before the winter rains fill the creek, rendering it inaccessible.

"All this stuff is going to end up in the ocean," Supplee said. "We have already begun seeing cans and other items associated with

this type of activity washing up on the local beaches."

Supplee said the spray cans contain solvents and latex paint used to cover up old walls to begin new tags, all of which can be very damaging to marine animals and their environments.

To combat the problem, local law enforcement work with the probation department and other youth correctional groups to try to turn the taggers' "creative" energy into something positive.

Dave True, program director for Youth Community Restoration Program, an after-school program that coordinates with the Santa

Cruz County Probation Department, is getting convicted taggers to clean up the vandalism by covering it with murals, in addition to having them do various types of other work to fulfill probation requirements.

"We do a lot of things, but with regards to tagging we do litter removal and tagging abatement," he said. "In tagging abatement, you don't just want to paint over graffiti because all you are doing is creating a (canvas). So we try other techniques such as using murals to fill the empty space."

True said the group is currently finishing up a 5-by-4-foot tile mural that will cover up a space on the backside of the Lettunich Building in downtown Watsonville. He pointed to several instances in Santa Cruz where murals have been used to cover graffiti and actually stopped taggings from reoccurring.

Erin Nelson-Serrano works out of the Watsonville Probation Office and works closely with True to place convicted taggers.

"These kids have an abundance of time to get into this type of activity," Nelson-Serrano said. "I try to work with Y-CORE so they can fulfill their probation requirements by fixing what they may have done."

The team of county officials will be scheduling a cleanup crew, probably with Y-CORE, for sometime this summer to clean the Aptos Creek area around the railroad trestle.