

Citizen Action

by Diana Schweickart, ITPI Project Manager

*Here man is no longer the center of the world,
Only a witness, but a witness who is also
a partner in the silent life of nature,
bound by secret affinities to the trees.*
- Dag Hammarskjold



I am passionate about life on this amazing planet and can get overwhelmed by how much work there is to do to keep it safe and healthy. I get emails every day from environmental groups with large and international missions to curb global warming, protect wilderness areas, save endangered species and clean up the oceans. I donate to these groups, sign their petitions and make phone calls to my congress people when asked. Last fall, however, I decided to take direct action. I took a small action, one that doesn't affect the whole planet or even my whole town. But it was an action I could manage and it made a difference to the environment, me and the small community of people who hike Mt. Tam's Old Railroad Grade in Mill Valley, CA.

Old Railroad Grade follows the route originally carved out for the Mt. Tamalpais Scenic Railway, which opened in 1896 and gained international fame as the "Crookedest Railroad in the World." The railway stopped running in 1930, a victim of a devastating fire in 1929 and the Great Depression. On the section of the Grade that I hike, there's a fence that was probably installed while the railway was still in operation. It is in disrepair and the Redwoods that must have been tender saplings when the fence was built, are now towering majestic trees.

On one early morning hike, it came to my attention that several Redwoods have grown into that fence and the barbed wire that tops it. It pained me to see the deep grooves the barbed wire have made in the sides of the trees. I hadn't noticed the damage to the trees before that day but every time I've hiked the Grade since, I've wanted to free the trees of the barbed wire.

It took me awhile to realize that I could do something about the trees. At first I imagined covertly hiking the trail at dusk with a pair of large wire clippers, snipping the barbed wire and pulling it loose from the bark. Instead, I contacted the county agency responsible for maintaining the Grade. They told me that the fence is actually on private property and that they would send someone to ask the property owners to dismantle or adjust the fence.



Relieved by this news, I thought my good deed was done. But nothing happened. A couple of months went by and I contacted the agency again. This time I was informed that no one had spoken to the property owners and that they were too short staffed to send someone out. I would have to take matters into my own hands, challenge myself and contact the property owners directly.

First, I reached out to fellow hikers to see if they would stand behind me if I met with resistance and needed backup. I also learned that the injury caused by the barbed wire won't actually kill the trees but does expose the tree to borers and fungi that can cause damage and the trees cannot callous over (heal) as long as the barbed wire is lodged in the bark. Then I searched Googlemaps for the names and addresses of the property owners. Unable to find the name of one property owner, I sneakily opened their mailbox to read the name on their mail.

Armed with that information, I wrote to both property owners and asked if they might take a look at the trees and fence on their property line and remedy the situation. I enclosed photos of the damaged trees and the fence in disrepair.

I admit I had low expectations that my letter would lead to anything. However, I was delighted to receive a phone call a week later from Alfred Klyce, one of the property owners. Not only had he received my letter and looked at the fence, he had already taken action. He had cut up a bunch of inch thick wooden discs and placed them between the fence and the trees, effectively shielding the trees from the wire. Success! My fellow hikers stopped me on the trail to say they'd seen the discs and asked how they came to be there. They were as happy as I was to see that the trees are being protected.

When I asked Alfred about his neighbor and the likelihood of getting them to take action, he informed me that the neighbor doesn't live on the property. He originally purchased several large parcels of land along and nearby the Grade, built a large estate at the highest plot and then rented it out. Alfred said that someone else had asked them to take down the barbed wire along the fence many years ago. Alfred took down the barbed wire on his portion but the neighbor did not. And, there was some question as to if the neighbor even owned the land right on the line with the Grade.

I am still pursuing the neighbor on this matter. The Redwoods with the most damage are those on his property where the fence still has barbed wire on it. I've been to the County Assessor's Office to confirm that the property is his and sent another letter as my first was erroneously addressed to his tenants. I hope that I hear from him. I hold a firm vision of those Redwoods calloused over, the barbed wire a distant memory. Who knows? It just might become reality. I'm surprised and happy I got this far. As George Leonard writes, "Intentionality holds great power." That and some serious follow through, all well worth it.