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### THE HIGH COST OF DOING OUR BUSINESS

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George Mallory famously said he wanted to climb Mount Everest ``because it's there." It became a great cliché, but it's not the real reason adventurous types are drawn to high peaks and remote places.

We venture into the wilderness because it teaches us lessons about ourselves and about our planet that just can't be learned in the concrete jungles where most of us live.

One of those lessons is on display this year on top of Mount Whitney in the eastern Sierra, which at 14,496 feet is the highest peak in the lower 48 states. Rangers have removed the privy from Whitney's summit, reinforcing the growing backcountry ethic of packing out one's own poop.

Hikers for years have been asked to ``leave no trace" on the popular summit trail. But only in the last couple of climbing seasons have rangers been stepping up enforcement of that ethic by removing the mountain's only private potty and encouraging the use of ``Wagbags" to transport human waste.

Sure, it's distasteful. It's also work. Hikers carry enough crap without shouldering the burden of which they have just relieved themselves.

But they understand the consequences of leaving it behind. The Whitney climb is so popular that permits are issued by a lottery that ``limits" the number of hikers to about 19,000 each summer. The human waste hauled off the mountain so far this summer by that crowd amounts to 4,500 pounds, or 2 1/4 tons, the Forest Service says.

Imagine the size of the rock you'd need to hide that pile.

The visitors to Whitney are learning a life lesson that's hard to come by here on the civilized flats. Here, we take care of our business and flush, never giving the stuff a second thought, let alone a second carry.

But that may be changing.

Santa Rosa's Board of Public Utilities on Thursday considered hefty increases to the sewer and water bills of customers who flush into the regional wastewater treatment plant, which serves Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, Sebastopol and Cotati. By 2009, a bill that averaged \$50 a month 10 years ago could top \$120.

That'll get your attention.

Nobody likes rate increases, and as these hikes make their way to the City Council there will be questions about whether residents are paying for the higher cost of "doing business" or the increased costs caused by new development.

Regardless of the reason, though, it's good to shine a spotlight on where our wastes go, and what it costs to send them there -- financially and environmentally.

Which brings us to our other waste -- the kind we put in the big plastic can outside rather than the small porcelain one inside. Our garbage no longer goes to "the dump" west of Cotati; that longtime **landfill** is closed because of environmental concerns. So, instead of fouling our own environment with the trash we generate, we're sending it to someone else's back yard.

That's right, every day 1,000 tons of Sonoma County trash is loaded onto trucks bound for Marin, Solano, Alameda and Contra Costa counties. In the future, it may be sent to an Indian reservation 140 miles away.

Out of sight, out of mind. Flush, toss and damn the consequences.

Better we should all get into the wilderness every once in awhile, and get in touch with our own waste.

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