



Coast Range Chronicles 14: “Mmm ... Fajitas”

by

Tom Mahony
pacificoffering@sbcglobal.net
www.tommahony.net

The vegetation sampling for my M.S. thesis required two months of field work. I developed the sampling design in the comfort of a climate-controlled office, and it seemed straightforward at the time. The terrain didn't look too difficult on a topographic map.

But I was naïve. Or just plain stupid.

The redwood covered thousands of acres, mostly old-growth, with few trails. My field buddy and I had to bushwhack and struggle through every inch of dense understory. I soon realized the quagmire of my sampling design but stubbornly stuck with it, had some idealistic notion about scientific accuracy along with a bad case of graduate student disease (an irrational belief that somebody, other than you, actually gives a damn about your thesis. Hint: nobody does).

Throughout two months of field work we camped during the week and returned home on weekends. On one bushwhacking foray I had to wade through a deep creek. That night in the campground I placed my wet pants on a grill above the fire to dry. I drank a beer and talked to my field buddy and spaced-out from fatigue.

An odd scent wafted through the air. In my peripheral vision I saw a burst of flickering firelight.

I turned to see my pants smoking and sizzling and burning on the grill like a pan of fajitas. I quickly doused them and examined the damage. Holes pocked the material and one leg was in tatters, burned the entire length of the seam.

For reasons I can't recall, they were the only pants I'd brought for the week. And it was Monday.

So the rest of the week I bushwhacked wearing those shredded pants, my bare leg exposed ankle to crotch and the material flapping like some weird set of parachute pants. I hacked through poison oak and blackberry and stinging nettles and acres of ticks with my bare leg and groin taking the brunt of the physical punishment. Without belaboring the details, let's just call it violently unpleasant.

I learned three valuable lessons from the experience: (1) never design a field sampling protocol for brutal terrain in a comfortable office chair, as it obfuscates a man's true limitations; (2) poison oak gets worse each time you're afflicted with it; and (3) never slow-roast a pair of field pants over the grill of a campground fire pit.

They do not turn into fajitas.