

Digital evolution not touching all corners of California

By Mike Anton, Los Angeles Times

DARWIN – Here on the shoulder of the information superhighway, smartphones turn stupid, streaming videos shrink to a trickle and a simple download drags like a flat tire.

Darwin is a former mining town cloistered in the high desert mountains between Death Valley National Park and the China Lake naval weapons testing center. Finding it isn't easy – a sign that marked the turnoff from California Highway 190 was stolen recently.

In Darwin, there is no food, gas or lodging – or any businesses, for that matter. There is one stop sign. People emerge from their mobile homes and reclaimed miner's shacks shortly after 11:30 each morning and walk to the post office to greet the mail's arrival.

A sign at the edge of town announces Darwin's population as "50 or so." It's actually about three dozen, and they are outnumbered 3 to 1 by abandoned cars. There are retirees, artists, loners, eccentrics – independent souls who've accepted that the price of living in California's tranquil outback is a 90-mile drive to the nearest shopping center.

"We're a little more than rural," said John Rothgeb, 67, who has lived in the desert since the late 1970s, first in his van before settling down in Darwin. "Frontier is more like it."

But the 21st century frontiersman needs more than food, water, shelter and elbow room. He needs connectivity. He needs high-speed Internet. And the federal government is spending

billions to bring it to him.

Darwin is emblematic of the nation's digital divide – the disparity between those with broadband access and those suspended in the technological amber of the 1990s, with dial-up connections to the Web.

In 2000, just 3 percent of American adults used broadband at home, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project. Today, about 60 percent do. Only 3 percent use dial-up.

The difference in performance is like that between a bullet train and a steam locomotive.

Want to stream movies on Netflix or video-chat on Skype in Darwin? Forget it. Check out Wal-Mart's weekly sales flier? Schedule an hour. Peruse the latest funny-cat videos on YouTube? The incessant buffering might induce a seizure.

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