

## One British man's crusade against illegal billboards in France

Tony Smith led a community effort to remove more than 1,000 illegal billboards from roadsides and parks



The Montauban community has successfully banished illegal billboards Tony Smith

Samantha David Published Monday 21 April 2025 - 12:00

Tony Smith (71) moved from Kent to Montauban (Tarn-et-Garonne) with wife Michelle in 1984. They owned and ran a restaurant until 2019, but these days Tony is a warrior against illegal billboards.

"There were about 500 billboards lining the roads into Montauban, all of them promoting consumption in the face of an ecological crisis. So I got a about 15 people together and we went out one Saturday a month and covered billboards with blue tarpaulins painted with our own slogans. I was quite proud of "birth, consumption, death."

That generated a lot of media interest. We did this for about 10 years. Then we discovered that many billboards were illegally installed with the connivance of the local mairie/préfecture.



Campaigner Tony Smith

### Court cases in Montauban

With the help of the national association Paysages de France, we took the authorities to court, and won six cases against various préfets of Montauban.

They were allowing billboards in the park for example, which was strictly illegal. And each time we won, they had to pay up.

We also won twice against the préfet of Tarn-et-Garonne. This really helped because the authorities

began to react much more quickly when we contacted them. In the end we got around 100 billboards taken down.

Then we went after the rest of the département (Tarn-et-Garonne) and once we had cleaned that up, we turned our attention to the Lot, the Gers, the Tarn, and the Garonne, and in the end managed to get around 1,000 more billboards them taken down.

I eventually became the regional organiser for the South West with Paysages de France for 10 years. These days there are no illegal billboards in the area.

The mairie of Montauban eventually passed a local bylaw reducing the permitted number of billboards in the commune from 600 to 200, and six out of seven roads into the town are completely free of roadside advertising. We won.

We now organise clean-up days. We took 400 tyres out of the River Aveyron for example. A local farmer had put them there about 50 years ago to stabilise the banks and they had started falling into the water and were polluting the river. Because we did that, the mairie was reluctantly forced to take the old tyres away and dispose of them properly.

The maire was not pleased at all. He said it would encourage people to dump stuff in the commune because they knew it would be taken away. We got no thanks, nothing. But we don't do it to make people grateful. We do it to prevent pollution, and safeguard the environment."

### Tips for battling billboards

- Get a group of like-minded people together and form a collective, so no one person is legally responsible. Have regular meetings. At one time we had 200+ members, which was more than the local branch of the Green Party.
- Download the booklet from Paysages de France explaining the rules and regulations on roadside advertising, so that you know what is and is not permitted. Billboards cannot be more than 6.5 metres tall, but IKEA ones are very often over 20 metres. You can only place a billboard on the side of a house if there are no windows on that elevation.
- Survey the area, making a list of infractions with photos and precise details of the locations. Send it to Paysages de France, because contacting local mairies direct so often hits a brick wall.
- The police rule of thumb is 'pas de dégradations, pas de poursuites'. As long as you don't damage anything, they won't charge you. Do not trespass on private property.
- Invite local press and TV to actions like covering billboards, and post photos on Facebook.