Mark Dubois and the history of Friends of the River

■ by Kathy Crist
and David Bolling

Mark Dubois, to many Californians, is "that guy who chained himself to a rock".

The rock was in the lower Stanislaus Canyon at the edge of a rising reservoir, the year 1979, and Dubois did it because he was willing to give up his life for a river he couldn't bear to see destroyed.

The act was deeply personal but it will forever be remembered as one of the milestones of an emerging environmental organization called Friends of the River. Mark Dubois was one of the founding members of F.O.R., and by unofficial consensus, its spiritual leader. The chaining was not a publicity stunt, not a media strategy concocted by F.O.R. Dubois did it on his own and he was prepared to die.

Dubois first entered the fight to save the Stanislaus in 1973, while running a non-profit rafting outfit called Environmental Traveling Companions. He specialized in taking delinquent and inner-city children and disabled adults down the Stanislaus. But whitewater trips on the river, and camping along its scenic beaches, would end with the completion of New Melones Dam, then in its seventh year of construction. Dubois hated the idea, but doubted there was anything anyone could do about it.

Then he had a fateful encounter with Gerald Meral at a 1973 hearing of the California Water Commission, an advisory agency to the state's Department of Water Resources. Meral, an expert C-1 canoeist, had discovered the Stanislaus in 1967, the same week he moved to California. While working on a doctorate in zoology at U.C. Berkeley, Meral did some research and concluded that New Melones Dam made no economic sense. He and a growing number of river friends collected 100,000 signatures protesting the dam to give to President Nixon. But construction continued.

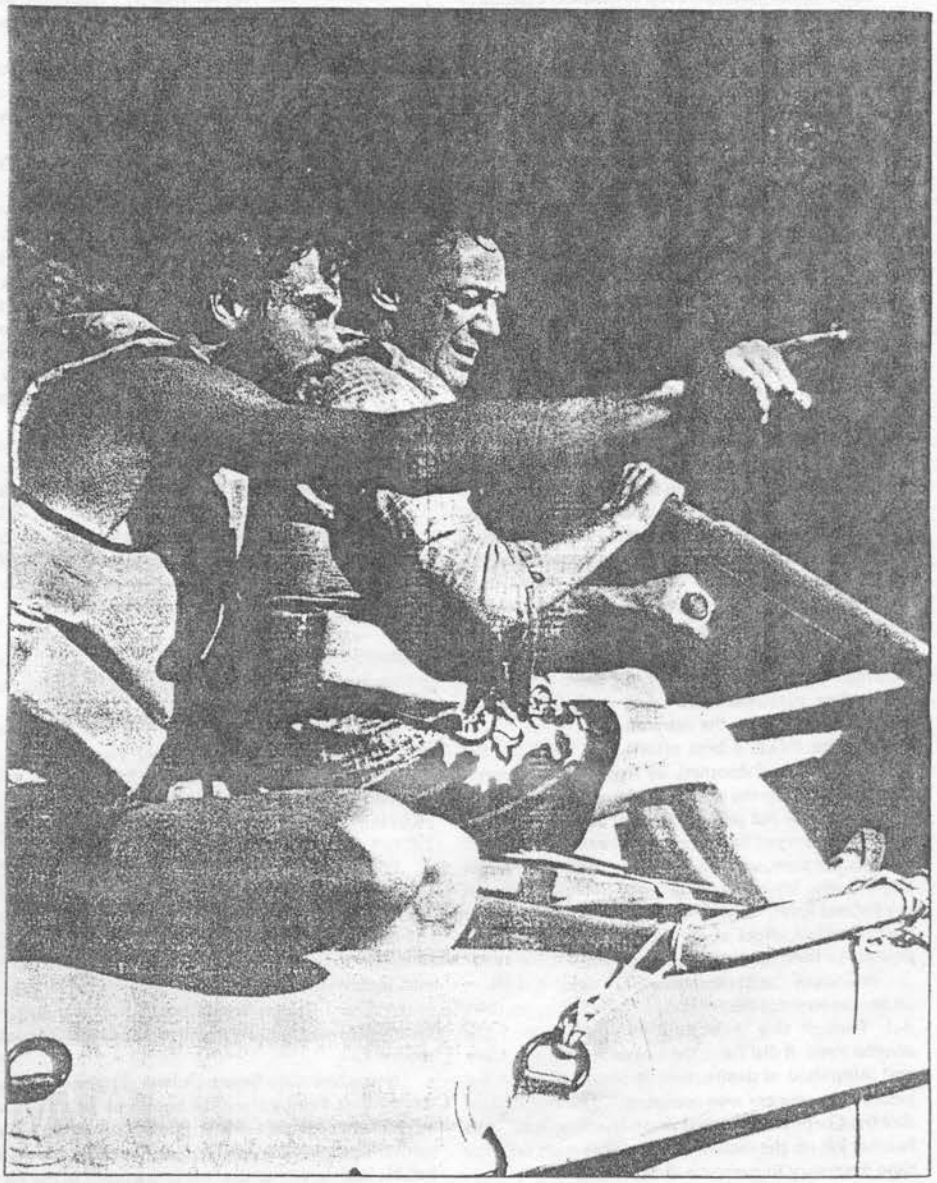
After he got his degree, Meral helped found the West Coast office of the Environmental Defense Fund, which subsequently filed suit against the Army Corps of Engineers for conducting an inadequate Environmental Impact Statement study on New Melones.

When the suit failed to stop construction, the indefatigable Meral decided to qualify an initiative for the California ballot that would protect the Stanislaus in the state's Wild and Scenic Rivers System. If the measure passed, it would prevent New Melones Dam from ever being filled to capacity.

Meral traveled the state talking up the values of the river, quoting a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) study showing that the Stanislaus was the West's premier rafting river with some 90,000 visitors each year. High in the Sierra foothills north of Yosemite National Park, the Stanislaus offered easy access and thrilling but forgiving whitewater.

Dubois was impressed with both Meral's energy and research. So when Meral asked Dubois to coordinate the Sacramento-area effort to help collect signatures for the November 1974 ballot measure, Dubois said he would give it a try. "It was supposed to take a couple of hours a day," Dubois recalls with a laugh, "but it turned into a 24-hour-a-day job." Dubois' life was never to be the same.

Politics wasn't really Dubois' forte. He was more at home on the river where he could walk barefoot, wear cutoffs and greet friends with a bear hug that left their feet dangling. At six feet eight, Dubois towers over most people, a fact (along with his habit of lifting boats all by himself) that made him something of a legend on the Stanislaus. By early 1974, Dubois was in the thick of the battle to launch what became Proposition 17.



Mark Dubois is in his element, teaching on the river *Photo by Tyler Childress*

With donations Stanislaus rafting outfitters collected from their clients, Meral, some EDF friends and a public relations genius named Rob Caughlin, formed Friends of the River as a campaign organization. Dubois' Sacramento apartment became FOR's Northern California headquarters.

During the next 10 months, a small group of strategists, including Meral and Dubois, along with 30,000 volunteers, worked feverishly to place Proposition 17 on the ballot. They needed 300,000 signatures; they got almost 500,000 and $238,000 in donations.

The response was so positive to Friends of the River's efforts that campaign euphoria began to spread. The election was winnable, the initiative would pass, the Stanislaus would be saved.

In the end, however, the pro-dam Californians Against Proposition 17 counter-attacked with a $400,000 war chest and a misleading media campaign. Friends of the River could counter only with radio spots. Perhaps inevitably, the measure lost by 300,000 votes.

But Dubois, who emerged from the initiative campaign as F.O.R.'s president, couldn't stay away from the river. As long as the Stanislaus was alive, he decided, he would fight the filling of the reservoir. Jerry Brown had just been elected Governor and a new political atmosphere swept through Sacramento. Both Brown and his resources secretary, Huey Johnson, were known to have sympathies favoring

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the river. Perhaps Brown could be persuaded to withdraw support for construction of New Melones. The courting of Jerry Brown began in earnest, and so did the growth of F.O.R.

The original plan had been to disband Friends of the River after the Prop. 17 fight, but Dubois and other friends of the Stanislaus couldn't let the organization die. In 1975 he and Jennifer Jennings began a Stanislaus letter writing campaign, building support for a state Senate bill to put the river in the state Wild and Scenic System. The bill died.

The following summer, the were joined by Brad Welton, a young activist attorney, Alexander Gaguine, an activist river guide, and Debbie Dome, a nurse-turned river guide. The nucleus of Friends of the River as a viable, long-term organization was in place, and Welton and Gaguine went on to erect an enduring structure. Later F.O.R. leaders, including Dick Roos-Collins, Tom Huntington and Catherine Fox, added professional leadership and expert media skills. The list of F.O.R. staff and volunteers reads like an honor roll of West Coast environmentalists.

When New Melones Dam was completed in 1978, F.O.R. searched frantically for ways to prevent the reservoir from being filled to capacity. Sixty people trekked from Camp Nine on the Stanislaus to Sacramento, carrying a toyon tree from the doomed canyon to plant outside Gov. Brown's office. Twice a week, F.O.R. outfitters took VIPs and members of the media down the river.

Volunteer scientists presented evidence to the Carter administration that more than 600 archaeological and historical sites between Camp Nine and Melones would be flooded by the dam. Simultaneously, they persuaded Brown to push for national monument status for the canyon.

Despite F.O.R.'s best efforts, the fight for the Stanislaus seemed doomed. By April, 1979 the reservoir had crept up the river's banks almost to Parrots Ferry, the take-out point for upper canyon runs, the lower boundary of the river's most beautiful corridor.

"At the time, we were working with the Interior Department, trying to get protection for the river at the federal level," says Dubois. "It was just another year, another effort at trying to slow the process down. We tried anything we could get a handle on."

Friends of the River managed to delay the filling under the terms of the federal Historical Preservation Act. Though this legislation couldn't protect the canyon itself, it did force the Corps to do some minimal mitigation of destruction to historical sites. But before that process was completed, Dubois learned that the Corps had ordered its archaeologist to "do a hatchet job on the Indian sites" rather than take the time necessary to preserve delicate artifacts.

"The Corps was going to fill the dam above Parrots Ferry, but they'd made no public announcement," Dubois says. "What they were doing was against the law."

Desperate and despairing, Dubois decided to chain himself inside the canyon to protest the illegal flooding of the river. He asked an old friend to help him make some shackles, but the friend refused. "He realized he would be helping me to die," Dubois says, "but I had such a strong personal feeling about what I planned to do that, after all we'd done, I thought, if they're going to flood and kill something that's been around nine million years, one small life like mine won't make a difference. Nothing else had worked. It was the only way I knew of to speak out on the life of this place."

Dubois wrote a letter to Colonel Donald O'Shei, District Engineer of the Corps, emphasizing that his action had nothing to do with Friends of the River. "I went to deliver the letter," he remembers, "and passed Governor Brown's office on the way. I was amazed by how large the toyon tree we'd planted had grown in such a short time. When I saw it, all my fear turned to strength."

Next, Dubois met with outfitter Marty McDonnell, whom he'd nicknamed "Deep Paddle."

"I knew I could trust him." Dubois says. "We planned for him to check on me while I was chained. I told him that once the water level reached my knees, I didn't want to see him again."

His location disclosed only to McDonnell, Dubois hiked into the canyon on a Sunday night late in May, barefoot and alone. The next morning he kayaked down the river for what he thought would be the last time. "I saw it flooding the petroglyphs, the meadow where David Brower once spoke on behalf of the river," Dubois remembers. "And across from the meadow was a perfect alcove where no one could see me."

It was two days before Dubois slipped out of his city pace and recognized the sound he kept hearing over his shoulder as a shrew. Blisters stippled his legs from the poison oak that laced the boulder where he sat. He had driven an eyebolt into a crack in the rock to anchor the chain locked around his ankle. Because of a false step in the dark while hiking in, a toe on his right foot was broken; his leg was swollen to the knee.

Each day a 20-man search party composed of Army Corps personnel, BLM rangers, and local lawmen scoured the canyon looking for him. Boats churned up the reservoir filled with beer-drinking locals armed with guns, "to put him out of his misery," one later told a reporter. Two helicopters searched the canyon from above. Dubois felt like a criminal every time the searchers swept by, even though he believed what he was doing was right.

The rising flatwater behind New Melones Dam lapped at the boulder two feet away, and could rise above his head overnight. Dubois did not have a key to his ankle lock, but he was determined not to be found.

"The time went quickly," Dubois recalls. "Every night the beavers and otters came out. I'd never seen a beaver on the Stanislaus before, but now their homes were flooded."

On the fourth day of his vigil, Dubois agreed to allow reporters from the Los Angeles Times and the San Jose Mercury News to interview him. The attention the stories drew paid off. Huey Johnson alerted Gov. Brown to Dubois' action, and Brown ordered the Corps to shut down the reservoir. Parrots Ferry got a reprieve.

Dubois' chaining, which was repeated in public view at Parrots Ferry by Gaguine and others, was surrounded by controversy. Some people in F.O.R. had supported his act of civil disobedience, but others had not. His friend David Brower came down on Dubois' side. "What Mark did wasn't civil disobedience," Brower insists. "There was no law that said he couldn't be there."

The river's reprieve would be short-lived, however. A flood in 1980 turned public sentiment against the river, and after that Gov. Brown either would not or could not stop the rising water. The reservoir was filled in 1982.

Although the Stanislaus was buried, it continued to flow through Dubois' heart and inspired F.O.R. to fight for other rivers. In time the Tuolumne, Kings, Kern and Merced Rivers all won protection, in no small part because of commitments forged and skills learned on the Stanislaus.

Dubois escaped from the Stanislaus tragedy on a global odyssey with his new wife Sharon Negri, exploring river issues around the world.

He returned to California to found the International Dams Network, a coalition of environmentalists fighting destructive dam projects in the Third World. "Every continent is copying the United States," he says, "both our advances and our mistakes."

Fifteen years after his fateful encounter with Meral, Dubois remains on the Board of Directors of Friends of the River, an enduring inspiration to those seeking to make a difference with their lives.

A version of this article originally appeared in Sierra Magazine. It has been edited and adapted for Headwaters.—Ed.

Dubois is River Conservationist of the Year

Mark Dubois has been named River Conservationist of the Year for 1988 by Perception, Inc., of South Carolina. Included in the award is a $1000 gift.

Begun in 1981, the River Conservationist Award is given annually to a group or individual who has contributed significantly to the preservation of one or more free-flowing rivers.

In a press release announcing the award, Perception said,

"Dubois has achieved the respect of river enthusiasts nationwide for his early efforts to save the Stanislaus River, and for his ability to mobilize people. The ranks of volunteers working to save our rivers are filled with those who became directly involved due to his encouragement and inspiration. Dubois' own commitment was strikingly evident when he chained himself to a rock to protest the rising waters of the New Melones Dam.

"Two years ago, Dubois' crusade took on a wider scope with the founding of the International Rivers Network, an organization directed toward the river conservation issues of Third World countries...(I)n June of this year, in San Francisco, he successfully produced the first IRN conference. Here, he obtained sponsorships to bring together river conservationists and other environmentalists from around the world in order to share ideras on the preservation of free-flowing rivers."

Mark Dubois *Photo by Perception*

Perception is the nation's largest manufacturer of whitewater kayaks.