

PACIFIC NEWS SERVICE

RIVER

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BATTLE OF THE STANISLAUS

FOR WHOM SHALL THE RIVER FLOW?

EDITOR'S NOTE: Far more than a conflict between rafters and farmers is involved in the current fight about the Stanislaus River in California. The conflict is between basic value systems. It is part of a nationwide struggle that will determine the fate of our wild lands and rivers. Rasa Gustaitis, an editor of PNS, is author of books and articles on recent perceptual shifts in America.

By Rasa Gustaitis
Pacific News Service

ANGELS CAMP, CA. -- It was both beautiful and eerie -- gliding in a canoe across the drowning valley, past the tops of huge oaks and pines, aware that somewhere, hidden just off shore, a man had chained himself to a rock in a desperate effort to stop the further filling of this reservoir behind the New Melones Dam.

No doubt the man was watching us, as were the beavers and deer, as invisible to us as the wildlife. In the canoe, Susan Brooks, 15, was aware of his presence and she was buoyant with the knowledge that the Corps of Engineers search party had been unable to find him and that therefore he, Mark Dubois, 30, had forced the Corps to do what reasoning and pleading had failed to accomplish. The Corps stopped filling the reservoir.

Two days later, Dubois would emerge, armed with a guarantee from the Corps that the water would remain at the current level for now.

But Susan was not searching for Dubois. She was scrutinizing the treetops for any stranded creatures that might require rescue. Like Dubois, she is one of the many people who have become deeply and personally involved in the long fight about this dam -- a fight that dramatizes the nation-wide struggle now underway for the use of natural resources and the future of lands, rivers and wildlife.

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The Stanislaus River fight has been going on here for ten years. The U.S. Corps of Engineers built the \$376 million dam -- one of the largest earth-filled dams in the world -- as part of the Central Valley Project, a vast water distribution and power-generating system operated by the federal Bureau of Reclamation.

Opponents of the dam, who lost the fight to prevent its construction or reduce its size, have sought assurance that the reservoir behind it would not be filled beyond its current level of about 12.5 per cent of capacity. To fill it all the way would destroy a unique stretch of white water. It would also, they argue, be costly, unnecessary and destructive of land and other natural resources.

The Bureau has said that it has requests for water equal to three times what a full reservoir would hold. It argues that the dammed river would also provide cheaper power and better water quality to farmers.

The opponents, led by a group called Friends of the River, have marshalled government documents and studies showing that more water would mean more waste and that conservation is the far sounder alternative to the valley's water problems.

But the fight over this river is not just over statistics. It is, in its essence, a religious confrontation. On the one side is the symbol of the dam, of giant pumps, of irrigation ditches that bring ever more imported water to mechanized farms. On the other side is the man who staked his life for a river because, he told a friend, his spirit belonged to the canyon.

This confrontation pits people who roar in motorboats across the stillness of the new reservoir against this girl in her canoe, rocking in the power boats' wake. Her face is still child-like, her sunburned arms and legs are strong, the long blond hair is tied behind her. At her throat she wears a little silver sperm whale on a chain. The image of a seal pup appeals from the front of her T-shirt and on her jacket she has pinned buttons: "Animals have Rights Too," "Support the Right to Arm Bears."

Throughout the spring, as the reservoir water kept rising with snow melt runoff from the Sierras, she paddled around, alone or with whomever she could cajole into going with her, to visit soon-to-be submerged islands and treetops and search out frightened rabbits, pocket gophers, snakes, lizards, woodrats and other wildlife -- including a

tarantula -- which she took to safety on shore.

Her self-appointed mission meant staying away from home, 150 miles from here, and sometimes from school. But "this is where I live," she explained. "And I've learned much more doing this than I did in school. This has completely changed my life."

Susan's rescue mission grew out of her involvement with wildlife which started when she volunteered at the local humane society at age 12. That activity took her to an environmental fair in San Francisco where she met Friends of the River.

Many of the Friends had become acquainted with the Stanislaus as rafters. The nine miles above Parrott's Ferry, the point where the rise of the water has been halted, are the most popular white waters west of the Mississippi, beloved by anglers, hikers, rafters, swimmers, kayakers, and spelunkers.

While seeking to save that canyon for sport, river enthusiasts found themselves turning into students of ecology, politics and economics. Before long, some who had thrilled at the challenge of the rapids were pitting themselves against far less accommodating bureaucracies at the Corps and the Bureau.

Now they are deft at quoting official documents to bolster their argument that filling the reservoir would destroy a place of historical and recreational value forever, and would aggravate some of the problems the dam is designed to solve in the Central Valley.

"The federal government is destroying wild lands and rivers, and only delaying the day of reckoning, when such shortages (if real) will be generally solved by careful management of existing supplies," argue the Friends of the River.

The General Accounting Office (GAO) has found that 56 per cent of water now used for irrigation is wasted. In the San Joaquin Basin, which together with the Sacramento Basin makes up the Central Valley, 90 per cent is applied by ditch irrigation -- the least efficient method. Only 10 per cent comes through sprinklers, which are more efficient, and almost none through the drip systems, the most efficient.

The Bureau has tended to promote more dams and canals that supply cheap subsidized water and has done little to promote efficient use of irrigation water, according to the GAO. Overuse of water has speeded the build-up of salts, fertilizers, pesticides

and herbicides in the soil and threatening to turn much of the valley, one of the richest farming regions in the world, into desert.

More water would encourage more wasteful use, the Friends of the River argue in a recent publication. Instead, they advocate, with some support from agricultural economists and federal advisors, a policy offering "good advice, patiently given to farmers, and a substantial increase in the average price per acre-foot provided for irrigation." Such a policy would "actively encourage conservation by farmers of their soil and particularly of water," they claim. Studies have shown that if the price of federal water is raised 10 per cent, use decreases by six or seven per cent.

The defenders of the Stanislaus can also produce other practical arguments: a full reservoir would cover 20 square miles with water, destroying increasingly rare riparian habitats, obliterating traces of Miwok settlements and Gold Rush miners, seriously damaging lower stream salmon fisheries.

But basically they all recognize that the fight is not about practical choices so much as it is one about values. There is no easy way to calculate the dollar value of a Miwok mortar hole beside the river, under the oaks, as compared to the same artifact in a museum, under glass. Nor is there a dollar value for wildlife living space. In its cost-benefit analysis, the Corps of Engineers did not even assign a dollar value to the rapids.

"Make sure you call it a reservoir, not a lake," instructed Susan Brooks. "River people consider that important."

It is a choice in values that will determine, in the end, whether the reservoir will be filled further and if so, how far. The decision will depend in part on the outcome of a case now in federal court in Sacramento. It will also depend on California's Governor Jerry Brown and Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus.

During the week Dubois was in hiding, eight California congressmen introduced a bill to preserve the Stanislaus above Parrott's Ferry as a wild and scenic river. How it fares depends in part on popular sentiment.

Whatever the outcome, however, Susan Brooks and her allies believe that the drama

on this river has improved the future prospects for other wild lands and rivers. The Friends of the River have found there are groups that share their values on other California rivers that are threatened by dams--the Eel, the Tuolumne, Klamath, Trinity. And they have sharpened their political skills.

Susan Brooks, for one, is a formidable politician.

"I'll help you rescue anything except a rattlesnake," a wary passenger in her canoe had announced before pushing off from shore.

She thought a moment, then replied pleasantly: "All right, then. You have three choices. You can let me do it alone and get bit, you can leave it to die and have me bring you the body later, or you can help."

Fortunately, confrontation was averted: today the only creature we found to rescue was a harmless spider floating on a broken styrofoam cup.

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