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## Ghost River Returns to Life

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### On the Stanislaus River

Hard rain pelted the river and the ghost forest of drowned oaks and sugar pines along the banks, but Jim Foust was too delighted to be cold. He was confirming the rumor that has swept like a good joke through California's river rafting fraternity -- after 10 years at the bottom of a lake, the famous rapids of the Stanislaus River canyon are runnable again.

"It's really kind of amazing," Foust said, paddling down the Stanislaus as he had dozens of times in the 1970s. "The trees are all dead, of course, but I recognize those rocks. And the rapids are just about how I remember them."

The Stanislaus was one of the special places to California environmentalists, celebrated for its steep limestone cliffs, Indian caves and soaring red-tailed hawks as well as the mild but thrilling rapids. Hearts broke when man sunk the Stanislaus beneath New Melones Reservoir to store irrigation water for Central Valley growers. But nature has proven to be the greater force, at least for now.

Drought has dropped the lake nearly 200 feet, exposing four miles of rapids where many California rafters -- including former Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr. -- got their first taste of white water, and where an epic and emotional environmental battle was fought a decade ago.

The Stanislaus was the first popular stretch of white water for rafting, an easy drive from the Mother Lode towns of Sonora and Columbia. Plans to dam the canyon set off several years of protests and brought about the creation of Friends of the River, an environmental lobbying group that has fought off every dam project that would inundate white water since New Melones.

Driving the canyon rim on a dirt road turned muddy by two days of chilling rain, Foust's excitement grew with every new river view. "There's Widowmaker (rapid), I think," Foust said to Gate Briseno, another veteran of the old river. The shrinking lake has left a bathtub ring of denuded rock high on the canyon cliffs. Silt has piled six feet deep along the banks of the resurgent river, now bare of the thick brush and trees Foust recalls from 10 years ago. Shrubs and poison oak rooting in the newly exposed flats are the only greenery.

Wearing thermal underwear and a wet suit, Foust put his raft into the river just below the bridge at Camp Nine Road. His party included Rich Sasser, a Modesto firefighter and part-time river guide making his first run down this piece of the Stanislaus. "Never thought I'd get to run this part," Sasser said. The raft drifted past a grazing cow, but there were few birds and no other animal life visible. Foust, owner of Sunshine Outdoor Center 30 miles downstream in Knights Ferry, stopped occasionally to clamber over rocks and check out side canyons to refresh his memory for landmarks.

He pronounced about four miles of rapids to be as good as ever. The silt had washed out of most of the rock groins and cascades during the summer. "This water is running pretty clean, even with the rain," Foust said. Downstream from Razorback rapid, however, the river widens and turns so heavily silted that the raft scraped on the bottom. About a mile farther downstream the silt bottom drops away and the flowing water turns to glass, signaling the upper bounds of the reservoir. Rapids that were lower in the canyon -- Chicken Falls, Wino's Swim, Chinese Dogleg -- remain inundated. The old Parrotts Ferry bridge where rafters used to haul out, still three miles downriver, is deep underwater.

Ten years ago, Foust was working the other side of the Stanislaus controversy. He was a river ranger for the Army Corps of Engineers sent out to find Mark DuBois, an activist who had chained himself to a rock at the water line somewhere in the canyon in an attempt to block filling of the lake. DuBois -- then director of Friends of the River -- was visited by accomplices and reporters, but was never discovered by Foust and other searchers. He came out of the canyon voluntarily, but not before Gov. Brown negotiated an agreement with the Corps of Engineers to delay the filling.

Word that the Stanislaus rapids are back has spread fast to old river hands, including DuBois, who said that travel plans will prevent him from rafting the canyon for a few weeks. "I very much want to go up there," DuBois said this week in San Francisco, where he is helping organize an Earth Day celebration for next April. "The Stanislaus touched people's hearts like few places have. It was accessible, but because you had these 1,000-foot cliffs around you, you felt as if you were 100 miles away from civilization. There is no other

limestone canyon on the West Coast that compares to it."

DuBois said he noticed this spring that the lake was dropping fast, and suspected that the rapids might reappear. But rafters who tried the canyon in the spring said the water and silt were still too high for the rapids to show. Now, for the past month, original Friends of the River activists have been rafting the Stanislaus, since discovering that it runs again. Some find it a bittersweet experience. "A friend called me up and said, 'Guess what I just did?' " said Linda Cloud of Sacramento. She arranged to go down the canyon soon after. "I just found it inspiring. I kept thinking to myself, I can't believe I'm here," Cloud said. "But there is a lot of it that is real ugly. For a lot of people it's real painful to go back."

Where the river stops dropping and flattens into the lake, rafts drift past the upper branches of old cottonwoods and pines poking above the surface. Upstream Cloud spotted grass and wildflowers growing on the higher banks. "I was really surprised at how quickly it can rejuvenate," she said. "From what friends told me, the river had cleaned out the silt for another mile between July and August."

When DuBois chained himself to the rock, the lake surface was at 803 feet above sea level. It has filled as high as 1,087 feet, and stands now at 891 feet, "as low as we've been since the early 1980s when we filled the dam," said Keith Davis, park manager at New Melones for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The lake will continue falling until October or November unless unexpected heavy rains begin refilling it, Davis said, but it likely will not rise to its normal level until the spring snow runoff.

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