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The Debate on The Fate of The Stanislaus

By Harold Gilliam

AROUND the raft, the Stanislaus flows clear and green and smooth, but ahead you can hear the roar of the rapids and see the sunlight on the spray where the river drops off suddenly. Slowly the inflated craft approaches the brink.

"Forward paddle, hard!" the leader yells, and the eight passengers dig their blades into the water with gusto. Then the bow dips down sharply; the front passengers are doused with spray; the boat rises and heaves and falls on a roller-coaster ride through the white water, knocking three people off the seats onto the neoprene bottom.

There are yells of excitement and delight as everyone is drenched. You see a quick montage of white water, shoreline willows, pines and boulders and cliffs and high ridges as the boat hits one standing wave after another and lurches and jerks and whirls. There is a unison yell of triumph as the raft sails clear of the rapid into the big pool below. The dumped passengers climb back to their places. But the triumph is darkened by the knowledge that this living stretch of river is under sentence of death.

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THE Stanislaus has become a symbol of California's apparently irreconcilable conflicts over water. In this dry land, water is life and livelihood, and there will never be enough to satisfy everyone's desires and demands.

In 1944 and again in 1962 Congress authorized the New Melones dam on the Stanislaus, as part of the Central Valley Project. Much of the river, upstream and downstream, was already dammed, but there were still winter and spring flood waters to be captured. In the late 1960s, before construction began, the Stanislaus was discovered by white-water boating enthusiasts, and the nine-mile stretch above Parrott's Ferry is now California's most popular downstream run.

The Environmental Defense Fund, the Sierra Club and Friends of the River have long tried to save the Stanislaus. New Melones has been on the state ballot and in and out of several courts. Agricultural interests want the water for irrigation; the power people want the electricity it would generate; downstream landowners want floods controlled.

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THE BOATS pull up on a beach near the mouth of Rose creek, and you have lunch while you dry out in the warm September sunlight and watch other boat parties run the rapids with yells and laughter. One boat bounces against the foot of the cliff on the far side of the river and spins dizzily around. Another goes over a large wave and loses one passenger overboard. Buoyed by his orange lifejacket, he paddles to the boat in the pool below, straw hat still jauntily in place.

After lunch you hike up Rose creek, where sunbathers loaf on the smooth warm rocks and the stream glissades over brown and pearl-gray marbled pavements that swell and dip and rise in voluptuous contours. About 150 yards upstream you find a deep basin where you can plunge from a 15-foot shelf into an emerald pool.

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NOW in the early fall of 1978, New Melones dam is nearly finished. The water will soon accumulate behind it, and the climax to the long conflict is at hand. The state has asked the federal government to limit the water level at least temporarily and save the upper part of the nine-mile run. Friends of the River, supported by conservationists and commercial boatmen, want the reservoir held no higher than Parrott's

KIT COPY



RAFTING ON THE STANISLAUS RIVER

Susan Ehmer

Ferry, ten miles above the dam.

Barring adverse court decisions, the reservoir is scheduled to be filled to Parrott's Ferry by next spring and above it by fall of next year. Heavy runoff this winter could fill it sooner. The Corps of Engineers could begin stripping the vegetation in the next few months.

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SLEEPING on a grassy shelf above the river, you waken at intervals through the night and see the constellations moving and changing patterns of moonlight and leaf shadows. You hear a hundred crickets in concert and the muted roar of the river over the rocks.

It occurs to you that this river flows through time as well as space. It was flowing when the mountains rose, were eroded away and rose again. It flooded in torrents as it carried the runoff of the melting glaciers at the end of the Ice Age. It flowed for centuries past Indian campsites now marked by mortar holes in the rocks where the aboriginals ground their grain.

The Stanislaus has become a symbol of our apparently irreconcilable water conflicts

It flowed by mining camps where Forty-Niners panned gold, and later it ran brown with silt and gravel when hydraulic miners washed away mountainsides. Then the river ran clear again when the mining stopped and these shores were frequented only by fishermen and hikers. It seems as if the river would continue to flow forever from the glacial cirques of the Sierra crest through alpine meadows and forests and gorges to the valley and to the ocean. It is hard to believe that this beach and this riparian woodland with its wildlife are likely to be soon buried beneath millions of tons of water and silt.

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NEW MELONES dam would provide new recreation both on the reservoir and downstream in the valley. It would provide water to irrigate farmlands that are deteriorating as the water table sinks. But much of the water that now goes to the farms is lost: It seeps from the bottom of unlined canals; it evaporates when it is spread on croplands where only a small proportion reaches the plants.

Most of the state's agriculture is still irrigated by wasteful flooding and furrowing methods. New systems of sprinkle and drip irrigation and other conservation methods could conceivably save an

amount of water equivalent to several times the planned yield of New Melones dam. But Central Valley Project water is subsidized by the taxpayers and sold to agriculturists so cheaply that they have little economic incentive to conserve it. And the cities, instead of recycling their own water and making more available to agriculture, waste it to sea.

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THE BOAT comes to a broad serene stretch of the river between banks lined with willows and pines and oaks and yellow-autumn-leaved maples. The water glitters with the reflected light of the afternoon sun. Dragonflies hover over the surface. On the banks butterflies appear like bright flecks of autumn sunlight among the grasses and scarlet trumpet flowers.

The boat's passengers, who have been exuberant most of the trip with yells, talk, laughs and songs, now fall silent, and the boat drifts slowly on the clear green current. Here you begin to sense the essence of the river and its identity with the rivers of history. From the waters of Babylon, from the Tigris and the Euphrates and the Nile to the Yangtze and the Ganges and the Mississippi, rivers have been arteries of commerce and culture. The Danube, the Moldau, the Severn, the Wye, the Bendemeer have been celebrated in music and painting and poetry.

To be on a river, to flow with it down rapids and through quiet stretches, to swim in it — to feel on your skin the power of its currents — is to have a direct experience of the flow of time and history and the cycles of the earth that bring the rain and the snow, the winds and the clouds, and the waters that flow down the mountains to the valleys and to the ocean again. This is the mystique of the river.

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AT PARROTT'S Ferry the trip is over; the boats are beached; and you say goodbye to people who were strangers yesterday morning but who have become intimate friends after the deeply shared experience.

You drive down the road through the old mining towns of Sonora and Columbia and turn off where the Corps of Engineers' sign says "New Melones Dam." A few miles farther and you can see it — a colossal pile of gray rock dumped into the canyon, as high as a 60-story building.

You wonder what would happen if the reservoir behind it were held below Parrot's Ferry. There would still be a ten-mile lake. That invaluable stretch of river upstream would be preserved for future generations. And the farmlands below could be reserved by better use of existing water supplies.