

SIERRA

THE SIERRA CLUB BULLETIN

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1979

\$1.50

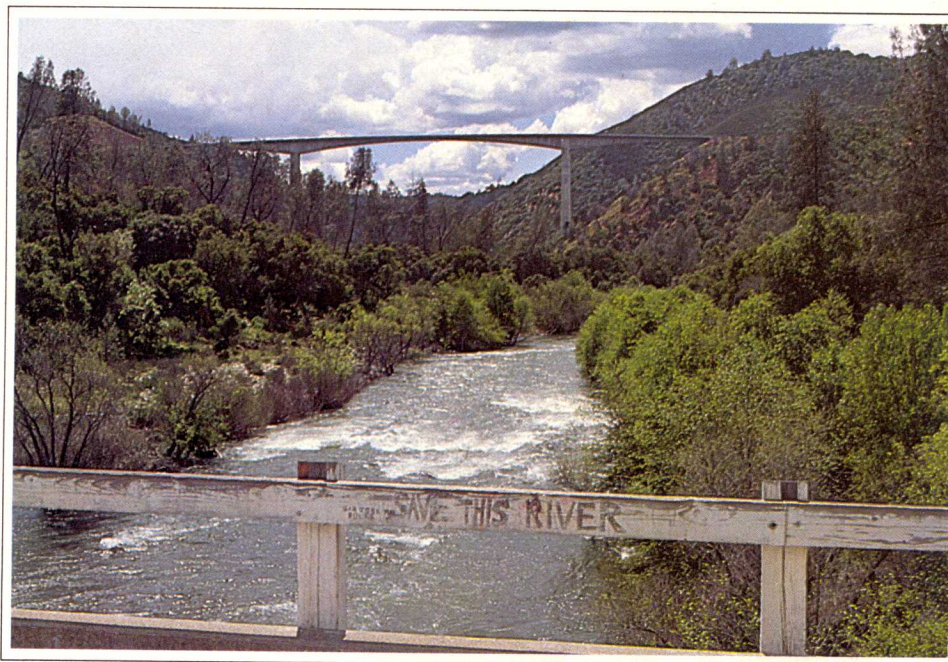




Saving the Stanislaus

Must We Wear Chains To Keep Rivers Free?

TIM PALMER



Don Briggs

IT MAY HAVE been the first time civil disobedience helped save a river. Through seven days of suspense, Mark Dubois, a leader of Friends of the River, remained hidden and chained at the edge of California's New Melones Reservoir in an effort to prevent the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from flooding any more of the wild Stanislaus River. Though the action was intended by the tall and serene protector as a personal statement and not as a media event, Dubois' protest and that of eight other people who also chained themselves drew unprecedented attention to this extraordinary Sierra canyon.

Dubois' action is the latest chapter in the long struggle to protect rivers. The Stanislaus has now joined a distinguished list of conservation battles, including John Muir's heartbreaking fight for the Tuolumne's Hetch Hetchy Valley, dammed in 1914; the defense of Hell's Canyon, in the Northwest, where conservationists were successful; and the crusade for an undammed Grand Canyon, which galvanized the Sierra Club.

When the New Melones Dam's gates were closed last April, the reservoir behind it began to expand eastward up the Stanislaus River toward Parrott's Ferry and, farther up the canyon, Camp Nine. The river is rare not only for its spectacular setting and the limestone caves and archeological sites along its banks, but also for its white water and its convenience for day trips; 35,000 people boated on the Stanislaus last year (in comparison, the Colorado River had about 12,000 boaters last year for trips of several days' duration). Both Governor Jerry Brown and Resources Secretary Huey Johnson have asked for federal help to protect the Stanislaus. Although the dam has been constructed, its mere existence needn't keep the upper Stanislaus from remaining wild; filling the reservoir above its current level, however, would bury the Stanis-

Opposite: Photographer John Senser was on hand as the waters of the New Melones Reservoir rose in the Stanislaus River canyon. In a letter, he told us the story behind this photo: "I noticed a bushtit bringing a downy feather to her nest—very close to being inundated. This nest had five eggs in it; I cut it loose intact and moved it up the tree four or five feet every other day. I wasn't able to keep up with all the nests going under, however, so it was finally drowned."

laus. Yet, like the nearly completed Tellico Dam on the Little Tennessee River, the New Melones Dam will be just as effective for flood control (its original purpose) without further inundation of the canyon.

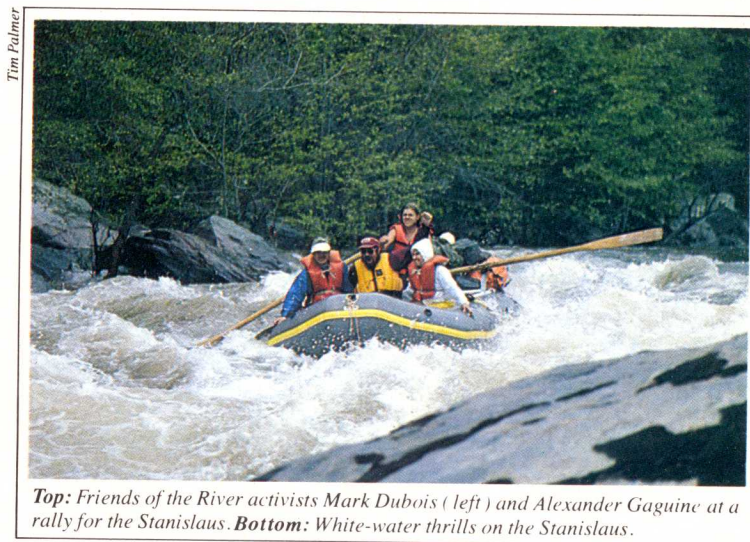
The struggle for the river goes back many years. New Melones Dam was authorized by Congress under the Flood Control Act of 1944. Later, in 1962, the dam was reauthorized as a larger, multiple-purpose project. The benefits cited included hydroelectric power, irrigation, enhancement of lower-river fish life, municipal and industrial consumption, dilution of pollution, and flatwater recreation. Neither earthquake hazards nor other environmental issues were considered. The Army Corps of Engineers showed a favorable cost/benefit ratio, and the ratio was not then questioned.

Since the late 1960s, however, environmentalists and others have argued that the Corps' and the Bureau of Reclamation's cost/benefit ratios were faulty, exaggerating benefits and minimizing costs. A state referendum was initiated to let Californians vote on the river's fate; Proposition 17 was drafted, and Friends of the River was born. The group began as a handful of people and grew to 30,000 volunteers who collected more than 500,000 signatures to qualify Proposition 17 for the ballot in 1974. The measure called for designating the upper stretch of the Stanislaus, from Camp Nine to Parrott's Ferry, as part of the state's wild and scenic rivers system. A small dam for flood control would also be permitted.

However, big money bought Proposition 17 for the dam builders. In the final days of the campaign, the Melones contractors pumped \$175,000 into an advertising blitz whose objective was confusion: "Stop Pollution, Vote NO on 17" was actually used to exhort a vote for building the dam. So was "Save the River, Vote NO on 17." Confused by the propaganda, only 47% of the voters voted for Proposition 17, and the river lost. But an independent poll showed that 59% had *intended* to vote *against* the dam. Friends of the River then pushed for state legislation to include the Stanislaus in the California Wild and Scenic Rivers System. A bill was introduced but never cleared the political snares of its legisla-



Don Briggs



Tim Fulmer

Top: Friends of the River activists Mark Dubois (left) and Alexander Gaguine at a rally for the Stanislaus. Bottom: White-water thrills on the Stanislaus.

tive committee. Thus the dam was built, the sixth-largest earthfill dam in the country, 625 feet high, a behemoth plug.

During the campaign, Mark Dubois rose as a leader through sheer charisma. A Sacramento native, former basketball star, caving enthusiast and an American River Touring Association guide, his only ambition now is to save the river. One of his accomplishments during years of unpaid work for the river has been to found Environmental Traveling Companions (ETC), a nonprofit outfitting group that has worked with inner-city children and now specializes in trips for blind, paraplegic and other handicapped people, offering wilderness experiences to those who might not otherwise have them.

Meanwhile, the California State Water

Resources Control Board (SWRCB) decided to limit the amount of water the Bureau of Reclamation could back up behind the dam, and this decision became the subject of a U.S. Supreme Court case. The Court finally declared that the state can regulate some aspects of a federal project as long as the intent of Congress in authorizing the dam is realized. While this ruling was a boost to pro-river forces, it does not offer long-term protection and, depending on details being worked out by a lower court, the ruling could permit inundation of the canyon to the South Fork, well beyond Parrott's Ferry.

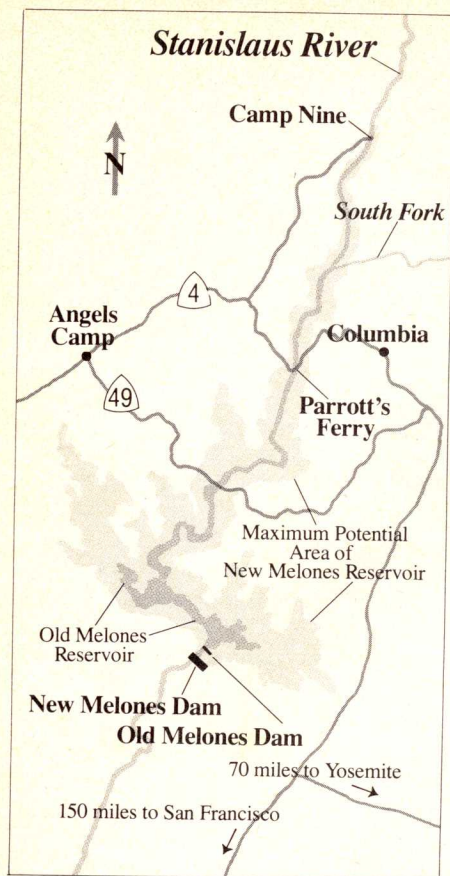
On April 1, 1979, the gates of New Melones were shut and the water began to rise. Soon it covered Old Melones Reservoir and its power plant, the gold-rush town of Melones, incomparable Miwok Indian petroglyphs and archeological sites, and the diverse life of the lower canyon.

Shortly after, Dubois traveled again to

Washington to lobby for the river. "The lower canyon is being flooded," he remarked in his even, seemingly-unangered way, "but we won't let it go any higher." Something in his confident manner suggested that there would be more than political effort. Much more. Indeed, Parrott's Ferry was soon to become a rallying cry to river enthusiasts all across the nation.

A bridge marks the site of Parrott's Ferry. Upstream is wild river; downstream, the reservoir. A campground is maintained at Parrott's

Ferry by the Bureau of Land Management (which, incidentally, opposes flooding of the nine-mile-long upper canyon), and many rafting and kayak trips end there. The site is popular, too, for sunbathing, swimming, camping, fishing and hiking. Although the Corps said it did not expect to inundate the upper river in 1979, flood conditions in the region would indeed allow the Corps to raise the level of the reservoir. "Parrott's Ferry is the limit" became the slogan of Stanislaus river activists, by now a broad-based group of archeologists, historians, hikers, caving enthusiasts, anglers, kayakers, commercial outfitters and their clients, independent rafters, foothill residents, journalists, state officials and even certain federal bureaucrats. With the state's position



strengthened by the Supreme Court's decision, California Resources Secretary Huey Johnson requested that the federal government stop at Parrott's Ferry. No firm commitment was received.

In despair at the loss of the lower canyon, Dubois took action. He sent a letter to the Corps' Colonel Donald O'Shei. Ten years of his life had been dedicated to the Stanislaus, he wrote, and to flood the life of the canyon, the Corps would have to flood Dubois as well. "My life is no different from the rest of the life here," he was later to explain. He would hide himself near the water level of the rising reservoir, chained to a rock, and he would have no key with which to free himself. *Newsweek* appropriately titled the story, "Risking Death to Save a River."

It was a dramatic statement, and news of the action exploded in the media. Governor Brown sent a telegram to President Carter saying, "I urge you to instruct the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to halt the filling of the New Melones Reservoir at the Parrott's Ferry Bridge. The beauty of the Stanislaus Canyon and the life of Mark Dubois deserve your personal intervention." The governor's statement was a milestone of support. Friends of the River rallied in Sacramento, San Francisco and the Sierra foothills to draw attention to the issue.

Of Rivers, Dams and Easter Eggs

RODERICK NASH

LONG BEFORE "Stanislaus" became a fighting word, the river sundanced in that part of memory my family and friends reserve for favorite past delights. In springtime the river was magic. We would drive up on a Friday afternoon through the green phase of California's two-season year. Blue lupine lined the roadsides, and there were redbuds in the damp gulleys.

The back road to the place where our rafts put in was a back road indeed. Floating the Stanislaus was not yet popular; we hardly ever saw other people. Whitewater boating for recreation was in its infancy. Only one commercial outfitter ran trips on the river—whenever he could scrape together a boatload of customers.

We always took two nights for the run, camping on Friday not far from the put-in where the rapids were many and river music hung in the evening air. Saturday was lazy, with sidestreams to explore, caves to peer into, old cabins to remind us of the gold-rush days.

The children learned to row on the Stanislaus, as they learned to pitch tents and cook over a fire. It was good, we thought, to have thresholds like the Stanislaus—schooling places for the appreciation of wilder water and wilder country. We were glad Yosemite existed in the mountains behind us, but surely national parks are not the only American landscapes that need and deserve protection.

On Saturday night we invariably pulled out of the river at a large meadow near the end of the run. Enormous pines and oaks ringed the meadow. Flowers were everywhere, and we always picked a small bouquet for the centerpiece of our floorboard/cooking table. While the kids played along the shoreline or looked for antlers in the thickets, we leaned against a pack, sipped beer and admired the view. On the far side of the river the dense riparian growth, light green, gave way up the slopes to oaks and digger pines. Near the top of the canyon rim a shaded draw supported a fine stand of yellow pine. The late afternoon sun washed everything gold. It was a moment to be relished; banked, if only for sanity's sake, against the disturbed places and disturbing intervals in our normal existence. As the shadows moved up the walls, and the coals in our fire neared steak time, we often remarked how fortunate California was to have sanctuaries like this meadow reachable in a few hours and, thanks to the river, not the exclusive province of the backpacker.

The highlight of every spring river season was Easter Sunday morning at the meadow camp. One of the waterproof packs contained small chocolate Easter eggs rolled in colored foil, which we'd hide around the meadow. The big hunt was never a total success. A few eggs always escaped both the children and the memories of those who had hidden them. Sometimes we found the eggs the next Easter, or the next, still colorful in their wrappers.

It has been a while since our last Easter at the meadow along the river. We think about those unaccounted-for Easter eggs. If the nation allows the waters of New Melones Reservoir to drown out Stanislaus Canyon, the hollow eggs will float to the surface of the unnecessary lake that would take so much from so many.

We wonder if anyone will see the little eggs and muse about their source.

We wonder if anyone will care. □

Roderick Nash's most recent book is The Big Drops, Ten Legendary Rapids (Sierra Club, 1978). He teaches history and environmental studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

The Tuolumne Needs Help, Too

BOB HACKAMACK

John Muir's battle in the early 1900s to keep California's Tuolumne a free-flowing river by preventing the Hetch Hetchy dam project is being waged again. The city of San Francisco, in conjunction with irrigation districts in Turlock and Modesto, has proposed building two hydroelectric facilities, one on the Tuolumne and the other on its tributary, the Clavey River, in the Sierra Nevada of California.

This time conservationists may have the upper hand because of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. As a result of a study ordered by legislation in 1975, the dam builders have not yet been able to get a permit to drill holes at the two sites for geologic testing.

In June 1979 the federal wild and scenic river study was released; it listed as a "preferred alternate" the designation of 83 miles of the Tuolumne from Don Pedro Reservoir upstream to the river's sources on Mt. Dana and the glacier on Mt. Lyell in Yosemite National Park. Strong opposition to the designation is coming from the irrigation districts, who see the dams as the way to lower electric rates for their service areas. Costs of the dams would be paid by the county where the portions of the river being studied flow, but benefits to local residents would be few. In fact, Tuolumne County voted against the dam proposal last year by a margin of 2 to 1.

The Tuolumne is qualified for national wild and scenic status; it has outstanding features, and already is working hard for people—five dams and five powerhouses supply irrigation and municipal water. Five are enough.

Only public support for the Tuolumne can overcome the lobbying forces of the dam builders. Comments on the study are requested until September 15 or a little later by the Study Team, U.S. Forest Service, Sonoma, CA 95370. Action then will move to Congress. When you write to the Forest Service, please send a copy of your letter to your representative.

Bob Hackamack has led Club efforts since 1969 to preserve the Tuolumne River.

Meanwhile, Alexander Gaguine, an FOR leader since 1973, also chained himself at Parrott's Ferry. David Lynch, a young river guide, joined Gaguine in the Parrott's Ferry Non-Violent Action Coalition. "We had to show that many people are determined to stop the flood—not Mark alone," Gaguine said. Soon the two were joined by six others.

While Dubois remained hidden (only one trusted confidant knew where he was), the Parrott's Ferry group was readily accessible. They remained chained for five days and spoke for the protest. "This river is very important to us," Doris Grimm said. "How far will our culture go in destroying natural places? Nine million years of creation destroyed in three months—for what?"

Dubois was holding out for a firm commitment that the water would not rise above Parrott's Ferry in 1979. Gaguine's group maintained their support for Dubois, while specifically seeking a state and federal agreement to limit filling to the current water level at Parrott's Ferry. Their immediate action was a stopgap measure, but their ultimate goal was something more permanent. As Gaguine stressed, "We want long-term protection

for the upper canyon. With chains, we can stop the filling this year. With legislation, we can stop it in the years ahead."

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., FOR activist Patricia Shifferle was lobbying for federal action. Don Edwards (D-California) introduced H.R. 4223 to designate the upper canyon as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, and the bill was cosponsored by California representatives Edwards, Stark, McCloskey, George Miller, Dellums, Beilenson, Roybal, Van Deerlin, Mineta, Dixon and Dornan, and Oregon's Representative Weaver. New hope grew for the Stanislaus.

Because of Dubois the Corps stopped filling. After a strong statement by the state and assurances that the upper river was safe this year, the FOR director emerged on May 28, appearing at sunrise on the beach where the supporters were chained, the rising water already lapping at their feet.

On June 2, 400 people rallied for the remaining wild stretch of the Stanislaus River. Parrott's Ferry was crowded with sympathizers who came to hear Dubois, John Amodio, then regional coordinator of the Sierra Club, and Knox Mellon,

State Historic Preservation Officer. Gaguine talked of the dam: "An investment has been made, and it can be used," he said. "Low-head turbines can generate electricity, but remember, even full generation would yield only one third of 1% of California's needs, and most of that energy would be spent pumping New Melones water that is allocated by the Bureau of Reclamation for new consumption. Flood control—the original impetus for the dam—can be provided just as well by a reservoir that is not filled."

He went on to speak of irrigation needs: A moderate program of conservation would save 3 million acre-feet of water—more than thirteen times the total yield of New Melones. The Federal Water Resources Council cites that a saving of 20% to 30% is feasible through conserving agricultural consumption. Even without conservation, the SWRCB says new water will not be needed for 50 years. This is the crux of the New Melones issue—35 years after authorization there are still no contracts or even documented needs for irrigation water from the reservoir. "As for flatwater recreational benefits," Gaguine continued, "there are 11 lakes within 30 miles. No water skiing above Parrott's Ferry!"

At the end of the rally, Dubois spoke of the power that people can have, that individuals can have, and the crowd became alive with energy for one more effort to support H.R. 4223. Hundreds of men and women organized by congressional district to plan lobbying activity, then they walked to the old Parrott's Ferry Bridge. Hand in hand, in silence and then in song, they made their own dedication of a wild upper canyon for all people.

Letters in support of putting the upper Stanislaus in the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers System should go to congressional representatives and senators. H.R. 4223 could be reported out of the House Subcommittee on National Parks and Insular Affairs of the Interior Committee at any time: Californians should write letters supporting the bill to ranking subcommittee members Don Clausen (R) and Phillip Burton (D), and also to Senator Alan Cranston (D) urging him to introduce similar legislation in the Senate. □

Tim Palmer is an environmental planner as well as a writer and photographer. His book, Rivers of Pennsylvania, will be published later this year by Pennsylvania State University Press.