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I felt like I was being tossed around in a giant washing machine. There was no use in fighting-the river was many magnitudes more powerful than my 5 feet. Finally, it was calm enough for me to tum my kayak right-side-up and take a breath of air.

I had been trying a new maneuver in Satan's Cesspool on the South Fork of the American River. I love what it feels like to accomplish difficult skills in my kayak. The laziest current can overpower me in an instant, and yet I can navigate some rapids without getting my face wet.

Kayaking wasn't always a big part of my life. Before the pandemic, I spent most of my time traveling to perform, jam, and record bluegrass music. The pandemic forced me to stay home, and I missed playing bluegrass with other people. I found a safer way to socialize: whitewater kayaking on the American River.

The more time I spent on the American River, the more I felt the inherent value of the natural world. The pristine beauty of the North Fork American River Canyon awed me the first time I kayaked Chamberlain Falls. The granite was sculpted and polished, and we found a bird's nest nestled in a crevice along the shore. Tiny ferns decorated moist alcoves like lace. I could see the shadow of my kayak gliding over the river bed through the crystal clear water.

Making friends with and experiencing the beauty of the American River made me want to protect it. I hosted river cleanups through the American River Conservancy. The first happened during one of California's atmospheric rivers. Five people helped me pick up trash despite the pouring rain. The second cleanup happened on a bluebird day, and about a dozen people came. A couple of boys used their trash-grabbers as swords instead of trash collectors, which was entertaining.

I felt ready to undertake a bigger project next. I coordinated with El Dorado County's Parks and Recreation department and the Sheriff's Department to organize a cleanup on a creek in the American River watershed where many houseless people live. The group I led collected around 235 pounds of trash. At the end of last year I was invited by the American River Conservancy to be a site captain for the Great Sierra River Cleanup. The event collected a total of 750 pounds of trash.

The American River and its canyons have helped me take responsibility for the fact that my actions affect my environment, and my environment affects me. I want to pursue a career in climate change mitigation. I fear that the canyons will be burned in megafires. I nervously monitor snow-pack. This year, we have been hit with a stream of atmospheric rivers and historic flooding after years with barely any water. I want to be part of the solution and leave a positive impact on the American River, just like it has positively impacted me.