

## Life on the River

The American River has been a constant presence in my life since I moved to the edge of the American River Canyon 13 years ago. I have swum in its cool waters, kayaked up and down the Middle and North Forks, rafted the South Fork, and spent many days enjoying the surrounding trails. I have seen the river meandering lazily as late summer and fall arrive, and I have seen it run high and swift in spring floods.

The first step toward protecting the river for future generations is to help others experience its true value. The memories I have made in this canyon—watching a bald eagle soar over the water at dawn, enjoying river otters frolic in the rapids, getting close and personal with bullfrog tadpoles, or spotting bears and mountain lions from afar—are utterly unique and irreplaceable. In recent years, there has been a sharp increase in interest in the American River. This has brought increased traffic, but it has also had a number of positive effects. Access to the river has improved, as well as education on safe and eco-friendly river practices.

These are steps in the right direction, and to continue to progress I think we need to increase the connection with younger generations in order to help them experience it for themselves. Increasing the number of ranger-lead hikes, information sessions along popular river sites, and creating social media pages that encourage teens and young adults to join the movement would all aid in building a grassroots effort to save this ecosystem.

Safe and eco-friendly practices need to encompass all types of river use. Some activities, such as fishing and hunting, are already carefully regulated to protect valuable species. However, more may need to be done. For example, regulations might be put in place to reduce sunscreens and trash that pollute the streams that feed into the American River. People must also realize that what they do at home affects the health of our rivers. Cars should be washed with biodegradable soaps and people must look to drought-tolerant plants suited to our climate. Many houses currently maintain English style gardens, meaning that a significant amount of residential water is used for landscape irrigation. Sharing this information, along with activities such as art walks, photography competitions, community clean-ups posed as challenges, or safe water practice party days, would help to increase awareness and action.

All of these activities would produce fun, engaging stories, art pieces, and photos for newspapers and social media to further the cause. Moreover, they would present an opportunity to hand out information, t-shirts and free passes to people who are getting involved. The river is an amazing place, and it's fantastic that so many people are beginning to appreciate that. The goal should be how we can encourage users, young and old, to commit to conservation and stewardship.

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