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It's 6:15 am and I stumble out of bed, tugging on my shoes, before trudging onto Steven's Trail. No part of me wants to be away from my favorite blanket, but once I start, all my problems melt away as I cut through my wooded sanctuary. Deer, quail, and squirrels scatter as we run Steven's to the river. My daily commune with nature, I watch the world wake up as I wheeze my way through the pristine area in my favorite worn-out Brooks running shoes.

Running with Colfax Cross Country has helped get me through COVID lockdowns. It became a challenge that I could control, affording me new appreciation for the American River Canyon and the tenuous position it faces with climate change.

I've witnessed climate change firsthand. Years of drought gradually turned my pine forest playground into sticks of tinder. Instead of running on once-shaded trails at cross country practice, we now dash through blackened remains of burned-out trees.

I recognize climate change for what it is- an existential threat. Yearly reminders during fire season underscore the immediacy of the threat that climate change poses. Some think of our climate as a future problem. But I know that climate change already shapes the lives of me, my community, and the American River Canyons.

My Girl Scout troop and I took up hiking during the pandemic. One trek out in the canyon near Foresthill we smelled something. Smoke. When we rounded a boulder to smoldering embers in the path, dry pine needles perilously close. Some negligent backpacker had left without ensuring their fire was dead out.

Upon returning home, the smell of smoke lingered in my hair and clothes, a reminder of the risks that come with California Foothills life. As I've grown up and wildfire remains a constant threat, I channel my fear of losing everything into ensuring that no one will.

My first step: reducing the spark. Enter Squirrelock Holmes, nature detective, squirrel, and guide through my Leave No Trace curriculum. Through humor, my deerstalker-clad cartoon squirrel helped kids embrace technical content. At Placer Nature Center we taught youth environmental stewardship, how to hike courteously, and correctly extinguish campfires. I cataloged these activities into a website, and Squirrelock received an Instagram profile, where my furry influencer posted challenges for worldwide followers.

Although social media can draw harmful crowds to scenic spots, I use it to educate, ensuring that younger generations do better. I know that my actions alone aren't enough to engender lasting change. I turned to my community to compound my impact. Partnering with Placer Nature Center, Traylor Ranch Bird Sanctuary, and conservation groups around Applegate, my Girl Scout troop and I organize environmental cleanups of tributaries and hiking trails. The images of garbage and informative articles drive home the importance of Leave No Trace principles.

My lived experience with climate change and subsequent response on personal and community levels equip me to educate others to achieve a sustainable future for our beautiful American River Canyons.