

Why are the American River and its Canyons important to me and my community, and what can my generation do to protect the canyons' natural habitat while improving recreational opportunities?

I vividly remember the delicate breeze against my face, the brisk crunch of fragments of fallen tree branch below my dirty sneakers, the pure, freeing scent of fresh air with hints of pine; and when I gazed out into the distance, the endless, timeless array of greenery with intermittent blue and white gushing waterfalls, the inadvertent art that mother nature had created... that was the moment that I understood what freedom meant.

The canyon is important to me because I discovered, in my aimless wandering, that when I choose to go outside, I unchain myself from the monotonous consistency of daily routine. I become gifted with a euphoric feeling from the natural scenery that it is not only dazzling, but therapeutic for mental and physical health. The canyon and the river is a sanctuary for me, a place for me to release my negative energy, overwhelming emotions, and channel the negative for self growth. The canyon remains my grounding, and for this I cannot be more grateful.

In the summer of 2016, an arresting realization occurred to me. I had always preached of the canyons infinite magic, and when I sought to bring my friends and family, and share with them the pleasure of this sacred stomping ground, I saw it all clearly for the first time. The canyon and river was overflowing with visitors; styrofoam cups, granola bar wrappers, cigarette butts, and shattered glass bottles littered the beaches. Trails once booming with vegetation were trampled by human footprint, people left behind whatever they did not want to bring back to their car, and just like that - the canyon seemed no better than a backyard pool after a party.

I knew when I saw all this, I needed to take action. That same day I returned home to begin what would come to be the most important project in my life: the "My Promise" project. It was an environmental project I created to become a milestone of change for the canyon. I created a statistics sheet of facts about plastic waste and littering in natural environments to educate visitors. I developed three projects I would facilitate to help protect and clean the canyon: a group clean up day, a day to remove graffiti from No Hands Bridge, and a day to create and place "Please Stay on the Path" signs, to reduce soil erosion and encourage plant growth. These projects were listed on a sign up sheet that I carried around with pride, where people would sign to make "their promise" to help preserve our canyon.

I encourage those who regularly visit the canyon to keep this concept in mind - our Earth gives so much and asks for nothing in return. If everyone puts in a little effort to clean up the canyon on every visit, it can remain picture perfect forever.