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Like a silver vein carving through the burnt ochre canyons and serrated crags of California, the American River, with its frigid, winding waters, is a centripetal force to its landscape. This river has always been a steadfast force in my life. For seventy-eight years, my family has camped along the Middle Fork, and I will continue this tradition by encouraging others to protect these sacred lands.

I scooped my first crawdad out of the rocky shallows of the river when I was four, pinching it tightly with my fingers, a hint of fear in my eyes. When I was six, I herded scores of caddisflies larvae around slippery stones, and staked out patches of ivory milkweed to glimpse orange-winged butterflies. One year we caught a bicolored King Snake in a minnow-trap. "This is a good snake," my great uncle told us, "We'll let him go now."

At the age of eleven, I sat on warm rocks busily painting the tufts of golden poppies and grape-jelly lupins that blossomed on the banks of China Bar. Soon the weekends became quests for hidden waterfalls and groves of Five-Finger and Maidenhair ferns on the steep trailsides. I sucked on the juices of blackberries with blood-stained fingers and munched on crisp Miner's Lettuce.

Throughout high school, I actively sought wild and untamed nature. I spent sticky summer afternoons running through White Manzanitas on the dusty trailways to No-Hands Bridge. I was attentive for oily Poison Oak, alert for the rattlesnake's warning, and prepared for the predator's pounce. I also listened for the signs of animals in the sky; Turkey Vultures and Red-Tail Hawks reminded me that nothing is certain, and that the land I had come to love was constantly threatened by the developing world.

From then on, trips to the canyons had a higher purpose -- a purpose to protect and restore a balance favoring nature. I utilized my role as Placer's Environmental Club President to encourage an appreciation of nature. 'The more who know and love the canyon, the more help there will be to protect it. Teaching others how to access the canyon will break the barriers of unfamiliarity that detract many. Our community can further expose nature's grandeur by labeling trailheads, providing large permanent maps at pathway entrances and intersections, and hosting more community-sponsored hikes. Having opportunities for enthusiasts to interact with the canyon by scattering indigenous seeds, collecting debris, or learning to identify the native flora and fauna will increase others' connections to the wilderness. These service projects will instill in visitors a sense of ownership and contribution, as well as teach others how to serve and protect the environment, thus nurturing a relationship between man and Earth so often lost in the modern world.

The American River inspires the inquisitiveness of children, provides a sanctuary for recreation and rejuvenation for adults, and reminds society that we are not separate from Earth. The American River is the foundation of this community and must be protected for future generations to enjoy.