

## **Dylan Wolfe, El Dorado High School**

### Why I Care About Our River

The outdoors have always been the one place big enough for my curiosity. When I was younger, the river filled me with a wonder that I will never be able to put to words. The water was adventure and thrill, but at the same time it was balance and peace. As I got older, this curiosity turned to purpose. When I joined the Natural Resources Program at my high school and it opened my eyes to the world of natural science and fieldwork, I fell in love instantly. When I found that there were ways to connect with nature beyond the hobbies that I already loved that can make a meaningful difference in giving back to what has been beside me my whole life, I dove in head-first.

Already, the outdoors have become so much more than a hobby to me. I've spent hundreds of hours in community service events, undergoing wetland restoration projects, conducting forest management plans, executing aquaponics research, and every new thing I learn about leaves me with an even brighter passion for the natural sciences than I had before. But one experience stands above all others to me-and that is the Watershed Education Summit (WES). WES is a four-day camping trip where high schoolers gather in the Crystal Basin to learn hands-on about watershed management and I absolutely treasured my time there. We spent our days alongside professionals wading through streams collecting data by day and sang around fires and gazed at stars by night. On the technical side of why I loved WES, it was incredibly awe-inspiring how the data that I collected was being used to better understand the health of the entire American River Watershed and would go on to influence decisions with the potential to affect thousands of people downstream. I felt like I was part of something so much bigger than myself; it gave me a sense of meaning. On the personal side of why I loved WES, I have never felt such a sense of community. I made friends with so many people in this close-knit group of like-minded, adventurous, rowdy, curious, and undoubtedly passionate kids from schools that I had never even heard of. I also made valuable connections with the professionals that I worked alongside from fields like forestry, hydrology, and resource conservation. All of this wet and dirty science has fostered within me a love for environmental stewardship.

Protecting rivers and canyons like those of the American River is going to require people who care enough to understand them. I believe that the most effective route we can take to achieving this is through education of the younger generations. If we get kids excited to learn about and protect our waterways, then we will have no problem keeping the American River and its canyons healthy and resilient in the face of unprecedented change; and I am living proof of that impact. This work excites me and I'm committed to pursuing it for the rest of my life.

**PARC High School Essay Contest Winner, 2026**