

## **Kaela Peña, Placer High School**

The majestic American River, with its glorious canyon walls, is not only a home and sanctuary to the wildlife that inhabit it but the people who visit it. I am one of those visitors who find it to be a beautiful retreat. The canyon offers many activities and, for me, that includes hiking on China Bar and Oregon Bar trails to swimming in Clark's Hole with friends and family. The river offers a place to escape the demands of life and reconnect with nature. To me, walking through the towering, native trees, listening to the songbird's chirp, and catching a glimpse of deer is one of the greatest rejuvenating experiences. There is nothing like swimming in the snow-melted waters that flow down from the Sierra Nevada mountains into the river.

Another connection I have with the river and its canyon is assisting and aiding the wildlife and environment. I have been involved with the canyon from a young age, such as my involvement in the Junior Ranger Program. From the native plants that grow to the cougars and birds that thrive off of this area, I was taught the importance of the river and how to properly care for it. For five years through Sierra Wildlife, I have been rescuing, rehabilitating, and releasing songbirds and fawns that come from the canyon once they are grown or healthy. This brought me closer than ever to the environment surrounding the river. Other activities I participate in are the American River Clean Up, as well as going on tours to learn more about the canyon and the river's history. This includes learning about the original bridges built by settlers, to the prisoner of war camp that was used during WWII. A history I was raised upon since I was five years old was the gold mining and Native Americans that inhabited the canyon and utilized the river.

The canyon is full of extraordinary views and wildlife, drawing a huge influx of visitors to the American River. A common trend that occurs on social media, especially Instagram and TikTok is to expose secret and local spots for photos. While this may increase publicity for the canyon and its wonders, it holds many negative effects. Due to social media users tagging the exact location of the spot photos were taken, hundreds of people flock to achieve the same photo. This causes native plants and flowers, like poppies and silver lupines, to be trampled and destroyed. This prevents bees and other pollinators from completing their jobs, it scares wildlife away from their homes and food sources but also leaves the river more polluted. The increased and disrespectful interaction between people and the canyon leaves the environment in a worse state of being. Park rangers have even attempted to prevent this destruction by asking people to not disclose the location of the photo. This is a substantial issue that often goes unnoticed but can be prevented by greater awareness and by not disclosing specific locations.