

Maggie McGaughey, El Dorado High School

The American river, the watershed that I am so lucky to call home. Growing up, I did not recognize how lucky I truly was to call its waters my playground, my friend, my teacher. Every rock and feather in my pocket, every leap into a snow melt stream, every trail bordered by California poppy and lupine, those were not only memories, but lessons that the majestic American river was teaching me. With the *Laws Field Guide of the Sierra Nevada* and my favorite hiking stick, I took off exploring the great unknown.

I am happy to report that my adventure into the great unknown continues. As a member of El Dorado High School's Natural Resources Program, my learning in the watershed goes on. After years of the river holding my hand, showing me the beauty and resources within its borders, it is my turn to repay its kindness. In the headwaters of the Cosumnes, I have built beaver dams with the American River Conservancy in an effort to restore the essential meadow ecosystems. I have rafted through meat grinder with my classmates, challenging what I thought it meant to work in a team and experiencing first hand the water's power to bring people together. I have volunteered with American River Conservancy as a nature camp counselor, showing campers the wonders of the river and encouraging them to protect it. Seeing the joy and creativity that the river inspired was wonderful and I have since made a promise that I will never stop learning from the American River, my first and favorite teacher.

Volunteering and playing in the American river has introduced me to Kimberley Shining Star, chairwoman of the El Dorado Band of Miwok and culture keeper. Her stories are inspiring and share one similar theme, the connection between mankind and mother earth is delicate, and it is our responsibility to maintain and fix that relationship. Through story and song she makes topics of conservation and stewardship accessible to students. Growing up with the river, I have come to realize that the rock in my pocket is more than a treasure, but an important player in the game of life. That rock creates a ripple in the river, and that ripple creates oxygen, the abundance of oxygen supports aquatic life. It offers a great place for fish fry to grow and lots of aquatic macro invertebrates for them to snack on. And those fish are a tasty snack for birds tucked amongst the lupin, whose feathers are in the same pocket as that rock. I know that connection is everything, whether it be a rock to a feather, an elementary student to the waters, or humans to our planet. Conservation is rooted in education. I have seen what a career in outdoor education can look like and am motivated to do everything I can so that I, too, can work to influence the next generation to treasure and protect the local wonders and vital resources of the American river and California.

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