

## **Swapnil Botu, West Park High School**

There is a moment I keep coming back to: I was hiking a trail above the North Fork, somewhere between the canyon rim and the river below, when I stopped and just looked. The water caught the late afternoon light, and the canyon walls dropped away on both sides, covered in manzanita and pine. No traffic, no notifications, no noise except the sound of the river. I remember thinking, 'I hope this view always stays exactly like this.'

Growing up in Placer County, the American River canyons shaped my life. I've hiked Auburn State Recreation Area trails, watched the river rise after winter rains, and spent countless afternoons with friends by the water. The canyons change each season: wildflowers in spring, golden hills in summer, sacred winter stillness. Each version has meant something different to me, but one thing has never changed-this place is worth protecting.

That feeling deepened the first time I participated in a river cleanup. What I expected was a few bags of trash and a sense of small satisfaction. What I found genuinely unsettled me: fishing line tangled in riverside brush, broken glass near a swimming hole, debris washed into a tributary far from any trailhead. The damage was quite widespread. Walking out with heavy bags, I kept thinking about all the wildlife depending on the water we were casually poisoning with carelessness. That afternoon changed the way I understood what caring about a place actually requires.

Through my AP Environmental Science class, I began to understand the systems behind what I had seen. Sedimentation, runoff, habitat fragmentation, and the long recovery time of damaged watersheds are all explanations for what happens when people treat natural places as disposable. I carried that knowledge into conversations with classmates and into our school's environmental protection club, where I helped organize a native plant awareness presentation focused on how riparian vegetation stabilizes riverbanks and filters runoff before it reaches the water. Learning that healthy plant communities along the North Fork are one of the most effective natural defenses against erosion made me see the canyon through a new lens, as something actively working to sustain itself when people allow it to.

Protecting these canyons for the future means supporting active habitat restoration, replanting disturbed riverbanks, removing invasive species, and partnering with organizations like PARC on long-term land stewardship that addresses the root causes of environmental degradation. It also means to advocate locally for conservation funding and showing up before decisions get made, rather than responding to damage after it has already occurred.

The American River needs more than admiration; it needs people willing to fight for it, and I am one of those people. When I stand above the North Fork canyon today, I see something I have worked to protect and will continue protecting. If, years from now, future students can stand in that same spot, hear the same river, and feel the same calmness I feel now, then we'll know our efforts to protect it have succeeded.

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