

THE CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE STANISLAUS RIVER – 1969-1982 AND ITS HISTORIC IMPORTANCE

The fervent and historic campaign to save the Stanislaus River took place non-stop from the about 1969 to 1982, with several peaks, particularly 1973-74, and 1979-1980. It was probably the biggest citizen effort to save a river and stop a dam in American history.

The campaign's strength and intensity was a product of several factors. Most important was the river itself. There were numerous dams already on the river, from near the headwaters at the Sierra Nevada crest to the Central Valley. Having multiple dams is the reality for rivers all over California. But a 13-mile stretch of the Stanislaus still flowed unimpeded through the foothills, from an old dam construction staging area called Camp Nine to the defunct mining town of Melones. The Stanislaus with its canyon was a place of great beauty. It was unique. People with an appreciation for rivers and wild lands readily understand that all rivers are unique, and all rivers are beautiful. Regardless, the Stanislaus, with its tall limestone cliffs, gorgeous spring wildflower displays, derelict Gold Rush machinery, caves to explore, and the distinctive flora and fauna of the foothills, was special.

Another reason this 13 miles of river was special was because it was accessible by whitewater rafts and kayaks. The sport of river running was in its infancy in the 1960's, as American leisure time increased and new technologies were used to create boats that were designed for rivers that were swift and/or rocky. The Stanislaus could be both, with exciting rapids. But despite such dramatic names as "Death Rock" and "Widowmaker", the rapids were not extremely difficult or dangerous to navigate. Except at high flows, the rapids were "Class III", and many people with an adventuresome streak learned to navigate them after a few weeks of practice on gentler rivers, or with an instructor. Many more people traveled down the river with professional guides, and generally found the experience exhilarating rather than terrifying.

Running the river was a great social experience for people. The Sierra foothill climate is generally mild, the river was cool and clear, the scenery much more dramatic than people expected, and visits to hidden spots – especially the magical tributary Rose Creek – caused people to fall in love with the experience of river running, and with the Stanislaus.

By the early 1970's both the activity of whitewater boating, and visitation to the Stanislaus, were exploding. The river ran through public land, so it was open to all, and people came for hiking, fishing, and camping as well. Largely because of existing dams, a great many of California's rivers were gone - submerged under reservoirs. For topographical reasons this was particularly true of Class III whitewater stretches – big dams with big reservoirs could often be located in those areas. The Stanislaus was one of the few remaining Class III rivers in California.

But simultaneously, the long-proposed New Melones Dam also was moving forward with huge political momentum. The stated purposes for this 600 foot high wedge of rock and

earth were water supply, hydroelectricity, flood protection, recreation and construction jobs. The dam's supporters cared not a whit for the river the project would destroy,

A community of people formed around the river. Often young, and with a love for the outdoors and each other, they couldn't understand why the Stanislaus was slated for destruction, destined literally for burial and disappearance. Many but by no means all of these people were river runners. With the idealism of the 1960's and 70's, they readily picked up on the activism of the new environmental movement. Questions about the true costs and benefits of large dams were being raised everywhere, and the answers were not favorable for dam proponents. Early efforts to halt New Melones were embraced by waves of new people year after year as they visited the Stanislaus, culminating first in the grassroots effort to pass Proposition 17 in 1973-1974. The statewide campaign organization for the ballot initiative was given the name "Friends of the River", and this hopeful effort pulled in a great number of energetic people. But faced with a well-funded and deceptive campaign, the initiative fell short, receiving only 47% of the vote. It was a tremendous blow to the river's idealistic supporters. The building of the dam continued.

The charisma of the Stanislaus was then joined to a charisma of a different type – the personal charisma of Mark Dubois. Mark was one of a very small group of people who, after the loss of Prop 17, decided that the fight must be continued. The river still flowed, despite the fate being prepared for it.

At six foot eight Mark had high visibility, but he had had to overcome considerable personal shyness to assume leadership roles. He had already helped found a group that took poor kids rafting and camping on the Stanislaus for free. He had been a foot soldier for Prop 17. His personal commitment and energy were huge. He made a point of touching, and if possible, hugging, everyone he met. Mark later made a very public name for himself when he took a courageous action in 1979 to stop the flooding of the canyon by the dam. But for those who knew him – and he developed personal relationships with hundreds and hundreds of people – what was more impressive was his ceaseless activity year in and year out on behalf of the Stanislaus. A great many people continued to be drawn into the campaign - by the place, by the stark choice between living river and dead reservoir, and by Mark and his passion for the cause. Lots of energetic and talented people got involved. Mark was not always the campaign's chief strategist or most articulate advocate. But it is accurate to say that at almost any time between 1975 and 1982, if Mark had dropped out, the campaign would have soon foundered. He was the glue that held us together.

People still loved the beauty of the place and loved to gather with their friends there. For many of the river runners the Stanislaus was the center of our lives. We could not easily accept that it should be taken away from us. Probably there had never been a wild place that had been visited by so many people yet was still slated for destruction. And people throughout the state who had never seen the river were still moved by its plight and joined in the campaign to save it.

Many thousands of people were mobilized for lobbying, letter writing, signature gathering, hearings and demonstrations, not once, but over more than a decade. Petitions had been sent to government leaders going back to President Nixon. One of the nation's first Environmental Impact Statement challenges – concerning the dam - was carried all the way to the Supreme Court. There was Prop 17. There was a large mobilization to pass state legislation in 1976. Many media and VIP's were taken down the river every year.

The supposed benefits of the dam had long been discredited. But by 1978 the it was near completion, and the campaign changed theme, asking that the reservoir be only partially filled to no higher than Parrott's Ferry, 5 miles upstream of Melones, since there was no demonstrated need for the water from a larger pool. Demonstrations were held, especially in 1979 at the beginning of the filling of the reservoir, culminating in Mark Dubois chaining himself to a rock and challenging the Army Corps of Engineers to drown him if they continued filling (the Corps backed down). In 1980 federal Wild River legislation was carried by one of the environmental movement's greatest champions in Congress, and supported by President Carter. Finally there was another statewide ballot initiative in 1982 to not only save the river but to mandate long overdue reforms to the whole way water was managed in California.

None of it was enough, the dam was filled, and the place is no more. People who had started out just wanting to save their beautiful river ended up playing in a very big league indeed, up against congressional pork-barrel leaders, agricultural interests and water agencies that for decades had been used to having their way, and huge federal agencies doling out hundreds of millions of dollars to engineering and construction businesses.

A great many hearts were broken. Death comes to all people, but death is not supposed to be the fate of a river and canyon and all its life and human associations.

Nonetheless, an impressive roster of environmental leaders and activists developed out of the Stanislaus campaigns, going on to lead not only Friends of the River* but also a great many other organizations and efforts.

And New Melones was one of the last big dams built in the US, after sixty years of dam-building frenzy. The Stanislaus was lost, but many other rivers, in California and elsewhere have been spared from dams and protected, in great part because of public efforts for their protection. Part of this was surely due to the example of the impassioned grassroots effort for the Stanislaus.

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**In 1976, while still consumed by efforts for the Stanislaus, Friends of the River decided to change from being the "Save the Stanislaus" organization, to one committed to protecting all rivers, lending its voice to efforts around the American West. FOR is still thriving and making a big difference for California today. www.friendsoftheriver.org*