

continued from page 8

A Broader Vision

from local donations, concerts, bake sales and, of course, the annual SYRCL auction. It was a shoestring operation that faced increasing challenges, and each challenge demanded a larger input from the community and a broader vision of the problems and solutions.

Perhaps, the most fundamental shift came when it became clear that a piecemeal approach to opposing dam threats was not possible. Eventually, community energy would flag and a dam would be built somewhere on the Yuba. What the SYRCL board realized was that a broad, everlasting solution was a needed inclusion as part of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

An overall plan was required: 10 more years of unremitting hard labor, several new boards of directors, four different executive directors, much community support, an increasing emphasis on political savvy, community outreach, funding through grant-writing, and, of course, bigger and better annual auctions.

Simple? No. Finally, in 1999, after 16 years of false starts, dashed hopes, and incredible effort, people in Nevada County gathered around radios to hear the voting in the final hurdle of the race to State Wild and Scenic designation. The vote in the California State Assembly, as it had been in Committee votes along the way, was nail-bitingly, gut-wrenchingly close. When the final vote came and the South Yuba Wild and Scenic designation passed, it seemed like the last chapter in a very long and convoluted novel. But along the way, the narrative had changed.

Through the years of work to counter the single-issue threat of dams, the eyes of the SYRCL community had opened to a larger picture of the Yuba River. Two aspects of this larger vision of the Yuba are particularly important. The first is that the Yuba River is a bigger entity than the 39 miles designated as Wild and Scenic

between Spaulding and Englebright Lakes. It is a complete watershed, with myriad branches affecting, and affected by, thousands of acres stretching from the peaks of the Sierra to the flood plains of Yuba City. The other important aspect is related if the Yuba is a vast watershed; then protecting it involves a collaborative effort. A simple us, versus them, is no longer possible. Just as passing Wild and Scenic demanded cooperation among a vast army of interested parties so, too, the continuing effort to save and protect the Yuba will have to be a common collaboration.


When the miners arrived in the Sierra foothills in the mid-19th century, they found an Indian culture that had honored, for thousands of years, the spiritual and material interconnection of the world man and nature linked in life and death. For a short time in the frenzy for gold, the miner mentality threatened this delicate balance of interdependence. Forests were completely cut and the river was clogged with mining debris. In only a few years, however, balance began to be restored with the famous Sawyer Decision of 1884, which basically reaffirmed what the Indians had known: what you do at one end of the river affects the other end, as well.

This interdependence became increasingly clear during the campaign for Wild and Scenic. In order to pass the bill, a multitude of alliances and compromises had to be made with other stake-holders in the Yuba River, including the Board of Supervisors, California State Parks, the Bureau of Land Management, property owners along the river, local recreation and community groups and even the Yuba County Water Agency (YCWA). Although the YCWA initially opposed Wild and Scenic, it was clear that one of their concerns, flood control for Marysville and Yuba City, was directly connected to SYRCL's desire to stop dam-building. As part of the Wild and Scenic campaign, SYRCL helped their one-time adversary pass Proposition 13, the Water Bond, dubbed "Wild and Scenic, Part II" by Wild and Scenic campaign director, John Regan. This kind of collaboration was clearly a new chapter in the story of the Yuba River.

Now, the next phase of protecting the river becomes a symphony of many voices from YCWA flood control to CALFED salmon studies from the recreation concerns of state parks to the meetings of the Yuba Watershed Council from SYRCL's conservation stance to its traditional logging opponent, Sierra Pacific Industries. It is a world in which SYRCL will be increasingly challenged to keep its own focus on the South Yuba, while maintaining the broader vision of cooperation with all players in the Yuba River watershed.

While the emphasis in the past has been about saving the river, the future will highlight programs that change the consciousness of the participants, as well. Examples include SYRCL's River Monitoring Program, classes on the life cycle of salmon, river studies in the schools and the annual river clean-up. All help monitor the health of the river, but that is merely the beginning. As Shawn Garvey, executive director of SYRCL, envisions, they are part of a "Watershed University" where "the more you can be connected to your local place, the more you can connect to a bigger sense of place." This is a vision of saving a river – a vision that defines the river as a metaphor for the direct connection of all life – a new vision that will open our minds to an ancient and flowing wisdom.

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