AMERICAN Whitewater

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Journal

AMERICAN WHITEWATER JOURNAL

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Editor-in-Chief
Evan Stafford
evan@americanwhitewater.org

Copy Editor and Member-Contributed Content Coordinator
Emerald LaFortune
editor@americanwhitewater.org

Volunteer Editor
Bill Cross

Art Direction/Production
Scott Lewis/Parts & Labor
scottlewis00@proton.me

Contributors
Lacey Anderson, Clinton Begley, Kimmie Gould, Mike Harvey, Hattie Johnson, Haley Robinson, Riley Seebeck, Evan Stafford, Peter Stekel, Charlie Walbridge, Nick Wigston

Photo Contributors
Scott Blankenfeld, Kevin Coburn, Mike Curiak, Thomas O'Keefe, Haley Robinson, Riley Seebeck, Evan Stafford, Elan Young

Industry Partnerships and Adverstising
Bethany Overfield
bethany@americanwhitewater.org

Safety Editor
Charlie Walbridge
Route 1, Box 329F, Bruceton Mills, WV 26525
ccwalbridge@cs.com

Missing Copies and Address Changes
Sadie Mathison
sadie@americanwhitewater.org

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STEWARDSHIP

DEPARTMENTS

Cover photo: Eagle Creek (OR) by Riley Seebeck

MEMBERSHIP DRIVEN RIVER STEWARDSHIP SINCE 1954

Our Mission, "to protect and restore America's whitewater rivers and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely," is actively pursued through our conservation, access, safety, and education efforts under the umbrella of River Stewardship. American Whitewater is the national voice for thousands of individual whitewater and river enthusiasts, as well as over 85 local paddling club affiliates.

JOIN US! OUR RIVERS NEED YOU!

Become a member by going to americanwhitewater.org/join. Starting at $35, our river stewardship work is only made possible through member support and being a member is the only way to receive the Journal delivered directly to your home.

Join the Enduring Rivers Circle to care for your favorite rivers in perpetuity. Created to honor and recognize people who have solidified the longevity of our river stewardship efforts through a gift to American Whitewater in their legacy planning. Contact Bethany for more information at bethany@americanwhitewater.org.

Affiliate Clubs: We have a network of over 80 Affiliate Clubs across the country that support the river stewardship work we do. Clubs are a great way to connect with other river enthusiasts. Check out our list of Affiliate Clubs to find a club near you! www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Affiliate/view/?

Industry Partners: The work that we do at American Whitewater is greatly enhanced by a number of Industry Partners who support us with financial contributions and in-kind donations. These contributions propel our mission and can give your company exposure to a robust community of whitewater enthusiasts. *Become an Industry Partner* by contacting bethany@americanwhitewater.org

CONTRIBUTE TO THE JOURNAL TODAY!

The Journal is a volunteer driven publication that relies on our community to submit photos, essays, interviews, artwork, recipes, poetry, and more. Be a part of the American Whitewater Journal, the leading voice for whitewater boaters nationwide. Reach out to our Member Content Editor Emerald Lafortune editor@americanwhitewater.org with contribution ideas or questions.

For more information visit our website: americanwhitewater.org

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The opinions expressed in the features and editorials of the American Whitewater Journal are those of the individual authors. They do not necessarily represent those of American Whitewater or the editors of this publication. On occasion, American Whitewater publishes official organizational policy statements drafted and approved by the Board of Directors. These policy statements will be clearly identified.

AMERICAN WHITEWATER BOARD AND STAFF

Horizon Lines

Clinton Begley

AMERICAN WHITEWATER OPERATES AT THE intersection of our founding documents, the leadership and expertise of our staff, and the priorities of our membership.

While not a legal document like our bylaws, our Constitution articulates our purpose and is a covenant with our membership. It may only be changed by a majority vote from active members. It has remained essentially unchanged since our founding:

A. Encourage the exploration, enjoyment, and preservation of American recreational waterways for man powered craft;
B. Protect the wilderness character of waterways through conservation of water, forests, parks, wildlife, and related resources;
C. Promote safety and proficiency in all aspects of whitewater activities such as the navigation of moving water, teaching, teamwork, leadership, and equipment design, by publishing and demonstrating developments in these and related fields;
D. Promote appreciation for the recreational value of wilderness cruising and of white-water sports.

These statements continue to drive our work today. But how our purpose manifests in what we do, and how we do it, has adapted to shifts in paddling culture, legislative and regulatory developments, scientific progress, resources, and the strategic visions of our team. In the 1990s, our focus included organizing whitewater rodeos, promoting safety, and advocating for dam releases to maximize boatable days. Today, we stand as a leading protector of upper watersheds and among other things, are recognized experts in hydropower licensing, deadbeat dam removal, Wild and Scenic protections, and river access nationwide. Despite how we have adapted our work to the changing world around us, the purpose that guides those choices, and the shared values that underpin them, has remained remarkably constant. It is the alignment of values shared by our diverse membership that has supported our agility and successful response to change.

American Whitewater's membership embodies remarkable political diversity. Indeed, our strength arises from our diversity of thought, creed, and identity. But how does such diversity still find unity in today's political climate? In times of relentless uncertainty and deep societal divisions, shared values can serve as an anchor and a bridge. We are leaning into that.

I am not naive of the profound challenges facing our country, or of the complexities of navigating our differences. Focusing on divisions is easy and there are ample spaces for that. Finding common ground, acknowledging our shared humanity, respecting our differences, and embracing our collective passion for rivers should not be difficult, but important things can often be hard. Aligning around what we share is easier on the water together, and a reminder that at least for the work we are trying to do together, the political identity that unites us is that of 'boater.'

The older I get, the more I recognize the wisdom of Ratty Mole from Kenneth Grahame's classic novel, "The Wind in the Willows," "'There is nothing—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.' It is especially true when that messing about is done together and in pursuit of a larger purpose.

Thank you for living your values by investing and sharing in our collective purpose. For nurturing belonging within our paddling community and making space for one another both on and off the water. It is more powerful than you think.

I hope to SYOTR soon,

Clinton Begley
Executive Director

Member Spotlight

Peter Bernstein

Location:
Philadelphia

Years as an AW Member:
I have been an AW member for more than 40 years, with membership in the Ender Club for about 30 years. I've been a Lifetime member since 2014.

Why American Whitewater?
Whitewater kayaking has been an important part of my life for 45+ years and I want newer kayakers to have the same opportunities as I had. AW supports many things that I value: improving river access, removal of outdated dams, and protecting and restoring river quality. By supporting AW, I support those values and provide opportunities for myself and other paddlers.

What is your "home river"?
The Tohickon Creek. It is a fun Class III run, with some more challenging lines available when you want to push yourself.

What's the one piece of gear you never leave behind when heading out on the water?
In addition to the "five essentials" I always take a spare car key and a small vial of emergency medication. It is no fun to be stuck in the middle of nowhere on a shuttle run because your one key has been lost/misplaced. Similarly, when I was younger I used to suffer migraines, and getting hit by one, while on the river without treatment options, can be devastating.

What's your boating motto?
Push when you feel up to it, but be conservative in general and whitewater kayaking is something you can continue to enjoy for a long time.

Leif and Natalie Anderson

Locations:
White Salmon, Washington and Fort Smith, Northwest Territories (NWT), depending on the season

Years as an AW member:
I actually have no idea. It's just something we've always done! Maybe 15 years?

Why American Whitewater?
Having been lucky enough to travel internationally a fair amount, it's been fascinating to see how different countries treat their rivers. The U.S. has a strange blend of really seeming to care for the health of the rivers with things like the Clean Water Act (hopefully that hasn't been repealed by the time this prints) but is also very concerned with private property and restricting access more than most other countries. It's important to have AW out there advocating for our rights and safety.

What is your "home river"?
Probably the Little White Salmon, but actually we live on the banks of the White Salmon, and our hearts really belong to the Slave River in the NWT in Canada.

What's the one piece of gear you never leave behind when heading out on the water?
Earplugs.

What's your boating motto?
You're doing great!

Photo by Mike Hagadorn

ASK AW:

Public Land Staffing

AW Staff

Dear American Whitewater,

I've been hearing about the staffing shortages happening on public lands this summer, and as someone who spends a lot of time using public boat ramps and doing multiday river floats, I'm starting to wonder—what does responsible recreation look like when there aren't enough river rangers or developed recreation crews around? I still want to get out there and enjoy the rivers I love, but I don't want to add pressure to already stretched-thin teams or contribute to problems like overcrowding or ramp damage.

So, what can people like me actually do to help? I'm reaching out because I want to do the right thing, and I'd love some advice on how to show up for our public lands this summer. Sincerely,

Trying To Do the Right Thing

Dear Trying,

First off, thank you. It means a lot to hear from river runners who are thinking about how to lessen their impact, especially in a season where public lands and river management crews are facing real challenges. You're right: With fewer USFS, NPS, and BLM rangers and maintenance staff, it's going to be more important than ever for all of us to show up with extra care, patience, and a mindset of ease and gratitude for river time.

Leave No Trace

There are concrete ways to help. First, travel as self-sufficiently as possible. Pack out your trash, go the extra mile to clean up after others, and be especially mindful at access points, which may not be staffed or maintained as usual. Stash some trash bags and cleaning spray in your vehicle and leave bathrooms and other common areas cleaner than you found them. If you're able, consider volunteering for a river cleanup, trail work day, or offering to support local partners that assist with river management. Your local boating club or outdoor store can likely point you in the right direction. In the absence of land management staff, help kindly educate other users about leave no trace principles and permitting requirements. If you want more information about these topics, American Whitewater's paddlewise.org is a great resource.

Use Your Voice

Use your voice to advocate for strong public lands and waters management, as well as robust funding for staffing. One of the most powerful things boaters can do is speak up for the places they love. Write and call your elected officials about the need for better funding for river rangers and access sites, attend public meetings about river permitting systems, and submit comments on proposed federal and state staffing decisions. Check our social media channels and website for the latest action items.

Grassroots voices from everyday river users can truly move the needle when it comes to protecting and improving our shared waterways.

Time Your Trips Wisely

And finally, think about timing: Shoulder seasons, less-trafficked launch days, or alternate put-ins/take-outs can ease the strain on crowded areas. We're all in this together, and your effort to act with care really does make a difference.

We appreciate you standing up for rivers this summer and beyond.

Sincerely,
American Whitewater

No Coolers Sweet Potato Quinoa Bowls

Lacey Anderson

Editor's Note: This recipe was originally published in Vegetarian Camp Without Coolers by Lacey Anderson, available through NRS and on Amazon. Find more of Lacey's tips and recipes at www.nocoolers.com.

Prep Time: 30 minutes
Cook Time: 20 minutes
Serves: 4

Lacey Anderson has spent her life chasing rivers, exploring through remote landscapes, and embracing adventure at every turn. She is still at it 30 years later—rafting, guiding, and sharing her passion for wild places with others. Lacey's journey has taken her on rivers across the western USA, Mexico, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Peru, working as a commercial whitewater guide, backpacking guide, and most recently, a government-employed river ranger.

Anderson's cookbooks offer a complete paradigm shift for private boaters, challenging the traditional heavy-boat, cooler-dependent mindset with lighter, more efficient approaches—like packing for multi-day trips with no cooler at all. Each book is tailored to a specific dietary need—omnivore, vegetarian/vegan, gluten & dairy-free, and even a no-cook edition—providing inclusive, practical options for river kitchens. While some traditionalists may find the concepts mind-warping, the popularity of these cookbooks proves there's a real appetite for change.

This nourishing and flavorful dish combines crispy tofu, nutty quinoa, and tender sweet potatoes, all brought together with a rich Hoisin sauce. Perfect for a "no-coolers" meal!

Ingredients

For Tofu or Chicken:
1 or 2 (12-ounce) blocks extra-firm tofu (shelf-stable UHT box) or 1 can canned chicken
1/4 cup flour
2 teaspoons garlic powder
1 tablespoon dried minced garlic
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper
2 tablespoons olive oil (for frying)

For Quinoa:
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 cup quinoa
2 cups water
1 vegetable bouillon cube (optional)
2 tablespoons soy sauce
1 clove garlic, finely chopped or grated
1 tablespoon ginger, finely chopped or grated

For Sweet Potatoes:
2 medium sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed

For Serving:
1 (7-ounce) bottle Hoisin sauce (or preferred sauce)
Water or red wine (to thin sauce to desired consistency)

Directions

Step 1: Prepare the Tofu
Start about 1 hour before serving to allow time for pressing and frying.

1. Press the tofu: Place the tofu block between layers of paper towels or a dishcloth on a plate or cutting board. Place a heavy object (like a canned good) on top and let it sit for 30 minutes, replacing towels if needed.
2. Slice and coat: Cut the tofu into 1/2-inch cubes or slices. In a bowl, mix flour, garlic powder, dried minced garlic, salt, and pepper. Gently toss tofu in this mixture to coat.
3. Fry: Heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a skillet over medium heat. Once hot, add tofu and cook for 4-6 minutes, turning occasionally, until golden brown and crispy. Set aside on a paper towel.

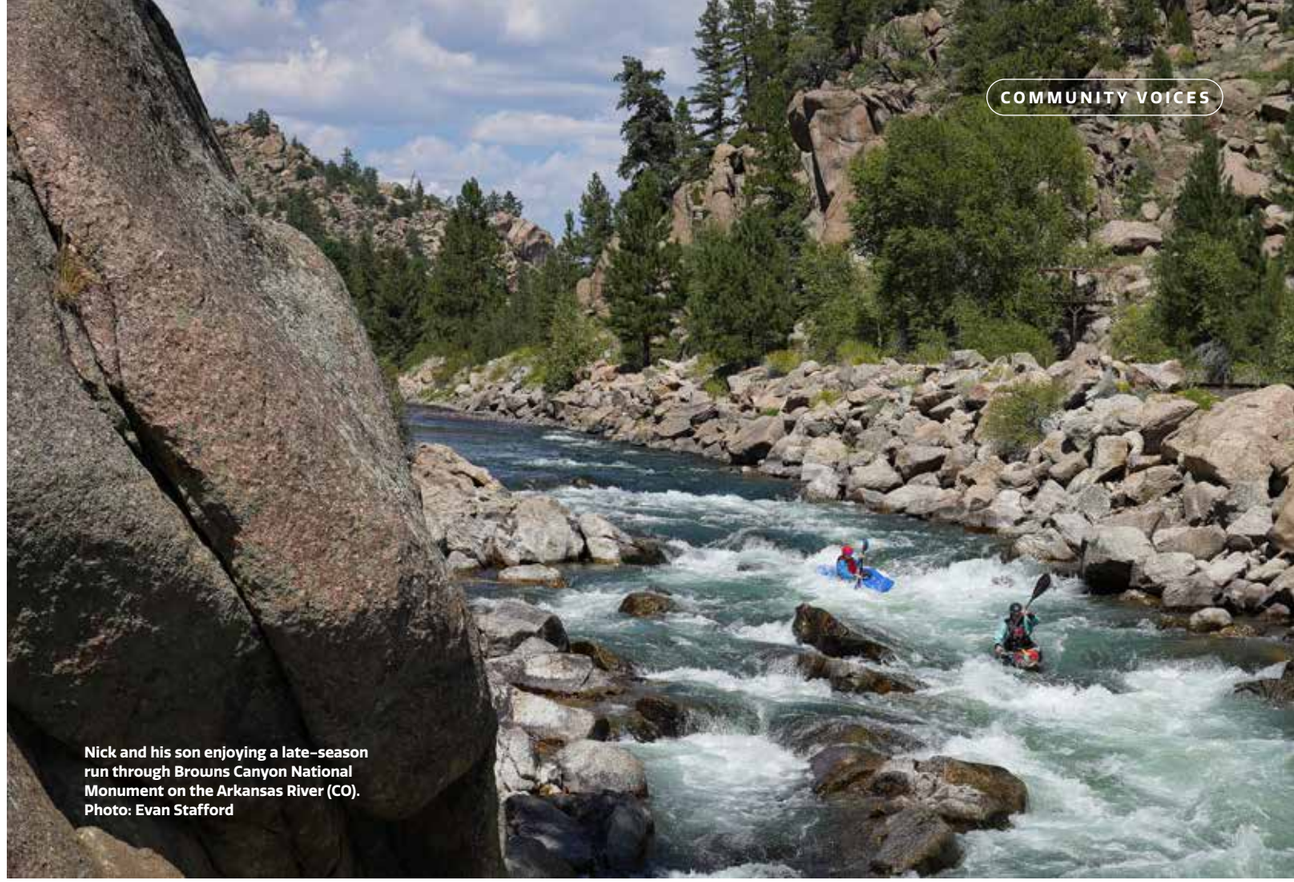
Step 2: Cook the Quinoa
1. Heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a medium saucepan over medium heat.
2. Add quinoa and toast for about 2 minutes, stirring occasionally.
3. Pour in water, add the bouillon cube (if using), soy sauce, garlic, and ginger.
4. Bring to a boil, then cover and reduce heat to low. Simmer for about 20 minutes until the liquid is absorbed.

Step 3: Cook the Sweet Potatoes
Choose one of these methods:

- Boil: Add cubed sweet potatoes to a pot of boiling water and cook for about 20 minutes until tender.
- Steam: Steam sweet potatoes for around 20 minutes until soft.
- Fry: Sauté sweet potatoes in a pan with a little oil until golden and tender.

Step 4: Prepare the Sauce
Thin the Hoisin sauce with water or red wine until it reaches your preferred consistency. Set aside.

Step 5: Assemble the Bowls
1. Divide the cooked quinoa among four bowls.
2. Top with sweet potatoes and crispy tofu.
3. Drizzle with the prepared Hoisin sauce.
4. Serve and enjoy!



Nick and his son enjoying a late-season run through Browns Canyon National Monument on the Arkansas River (CO). Photo: Evan Stafford

Leveling Up

How do you know if you are ready to run a harder class of whitewater?

Nick Wigston

GROWING UP PADDLING IN THE SOUTHEAST IN THE 80s and 90s, eddy-hopping was how we "play-boated." We would spend hours working on catching every eddy we could, moving upstream to find more features. We surfed waves and did bow enders and squirts. I remember spending a lot of time at Tablesaw Rapid on the Ocoee going upstream and downstream from eddy to eddy. When playboats became popular in the 90s, "play-boating" changed to focusing on surfing waves and learning to do tricks. Playboats were slower and not as fun for eddy hopping as longer boats. It's been cool to see the evolution of the past few years with the advent of performance half-slice boats. It seems that the two styles of play have now come together again.

One thing that stands out to me about those times was that the goal of running harder rapids wasn't as prevalent. It was fun to add a challenge to our paddling by coming up with harder and harder moves on a Class III or IV river. I never really thought about paddling rivers any harder than that. It wasn't until I moved to Colorado to attend university in Boulder that I started to get interested in Class V rivers. After spending so many years playing the rivers of the Southeast, and then playboating the whitewater parks of Colorado, my first few Class V rapids didn't even feel that difficult. The gradual progression from Class II to III to IV and then finally to Class V prepared me for that jump in difficulty, and I never felt like I was "in over my head."

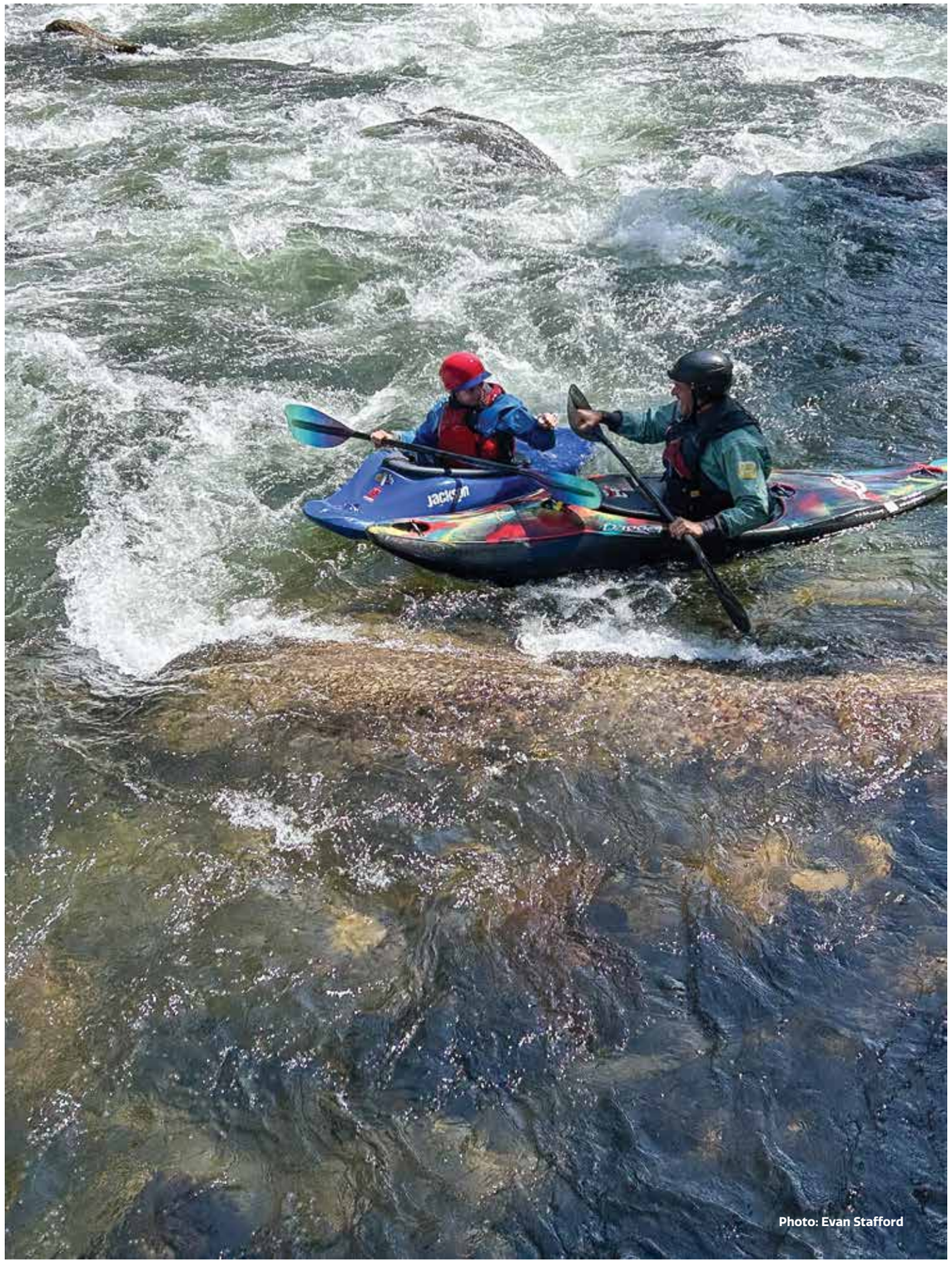


Photo: Evan Stafford

Most outdoor sports magazines and social media accounts tend to focus on the extreme versions of our sport. This is true for kayaking, skiing, snowboarding, mountain biking, climbing, and even fishing. The photos and videos we see portray maybe five percent of what the sport involves. Most kayakers are paddling Class III and having the time of their lives. So how important is it to try and run harder rivers when you are already having a great time in Class II and III? No rule says we have to try harder whitewater. If you are having fun, keep doing what you are doing.

If you are feeling bored or unchallenged on the rivers you've been running, make them new again by playing the river more than you ever thought possible and adding more challenges for yourself. Get a half-slice, playboat, or slalom boat, and try and catch every eddy on the river. Surf every wave and learn to stern squirt. Even try learning more advanced downriver tricks like a kickflip. Run rapids backward and try to catch eddies backward. Consider taking a class to learn new techniques and practice them on your local run.

If you decide you want to start paddling harder whitewater, spend a season truly mastering the rivers at the class you are currently comfortable with. If you are feeling confident in Class III and want to try Class IV, run your local Class III run over and over again with mastery as your goal. This means challenging yourself like you never have before and being sure you can catch every eddy on the river, surf every wave, punch every hole (even the big ones!), and make every challenging ferry. Practice boofing all the pourovers. Ride surf holes so you are confident in getting yourself out of one. As your skills progress and this becomes easier, make it more challenging by running the river at higher water levels or using a more playful boat such as a half-slice, playboat, or long boat.

Have fun with it, this is your opportunity to make an easier run harder and more exciting! Once you feel like you have done everything to master your current favorite rivers and you are ready to try something more challenging, start with a harder section of river at a lower flow so that it is more manageable. As you get used to the more technical features you can start to experiment with more water.

As you progress into more difficult whitewater, safety and rescue skills become increasingly important. Run every river prepared for a rescue scenario. You should have the skills needed to help your friends and they should have the skills to help you. It's crucial to have a solid communication system with your team and everyone needs to have experience with certain self-rescue and partner rescue techniques. You should be comfortable swimming in the river and getting yourself onto a rock or into an eddy. Learn river running strategies to prevent incidents and properly set safety measures where needed. Rescuing a swamped kayak and using a throw rope are basic skills necessary for all intermediate paddlers. Study the American Whitewater Safety Code and consider taking a swiftwater rescue class in your local community.

When taking the next leap from Class IV to Class V, the game changes dramatically. Class V is a completely different beast when it comes to risk, so it's crucial that your river skills, safety skills, group dynamics approach, and personal fitness are at a high level. Swimming in Class V is always highly dangerous and should only be a last resort. If you truly want to make this jump, spend multiple seasons honing your skills on several Class IV runs of various styles. Master some low volume runs, as well as some big water rivers.

Class V should be taken seriously, similar to an advanced athlete in any other sport taking on a high level of competition. Class V requires a much higher level of fitness than lower classes. All the paddling you've done mastering Class IV will likely be enough to achieve that level of fitness. However, cross-training and strength training are as important in the off-season as they are in any competitive sport.

Swimming skills are also paramount when paddling tough whitewater. Spend time in the pool swimming underwater laps and bring out your inner Michael Phelps with your freestyle stroke. Your life could depend on it. Practice swimming through some Class IV rapids that have minimal hazards and train yourself to swim into tough eddies. Once you have mastered Class IV in the same way you did Class III, you should feel very confident that you are ready to tackle the bottom end of the Class V scale (V-). Start on what is described as an easy Class V run at lower water levels. Run it many times, then try it with a little more flow. Take things gradually and have fun running the Class V- runs where you can continue to develop

cantly more technically difficult and carry significantly more risk than Class V.

Class IV and V whitewater can be very mentally challenging, and can create levels of anxiety that not everyone enjoys or has the inner tools to manage. Make sure you are OK with that type of stress, because if not, you can still have a great time on runs that are within your comfort zone.

In my 24 years of kayaking in Class V, I have known a lot of people who rushed themselves into leveling up and scared themselves away from kayaking altogether. It's sad to see friends who had such a passion for this sport quit because they got in over their heads. Don't let this happen to you. We can keep kayaking on great rivers until we are old and gray. There is no reason to push yourself into something you aren't ready for or don't truly desire to run. I hope to see you on the river soon! ■

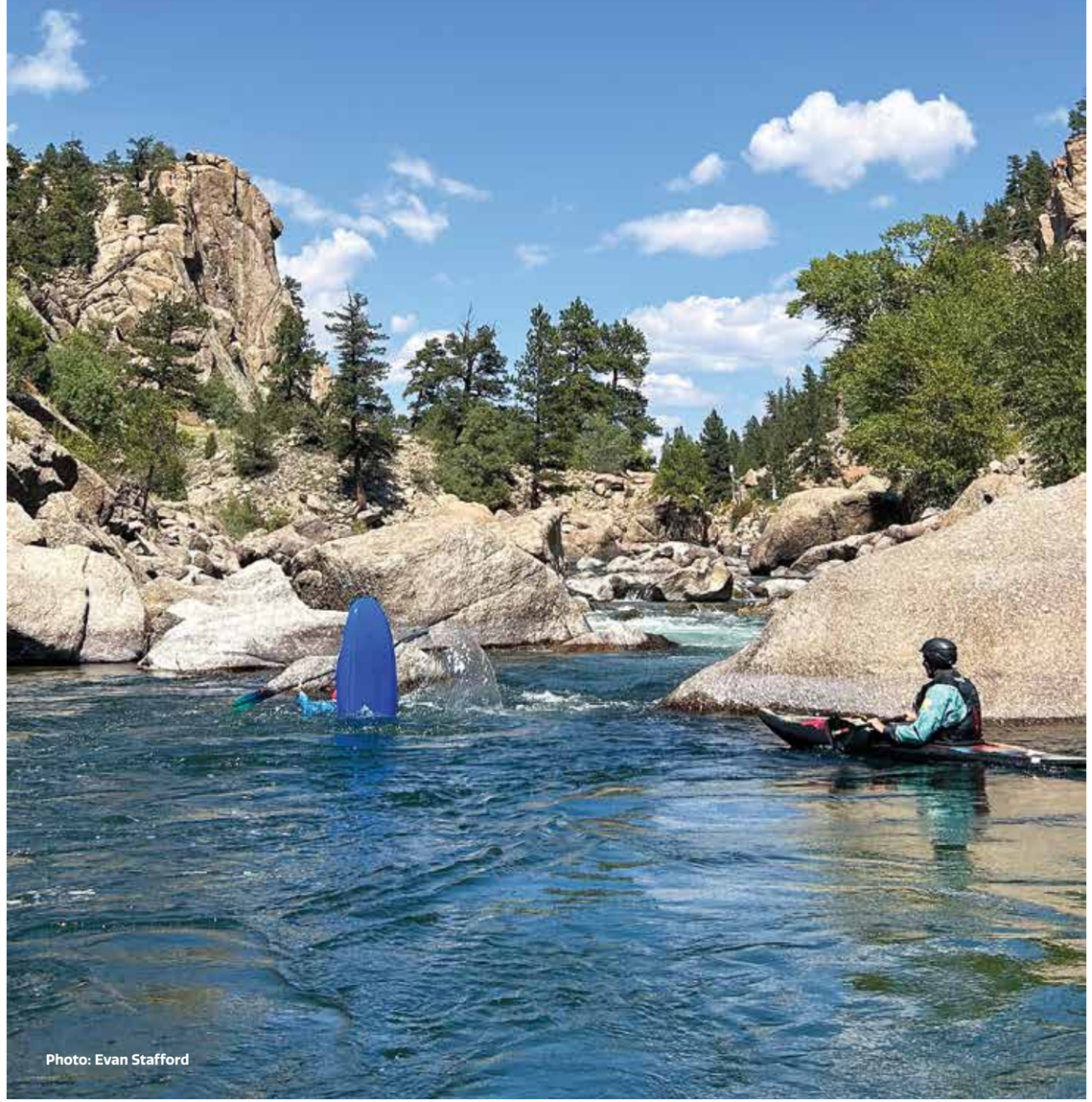


Photo: Evan Stafford

Photo: Evan Stafford

Boat Passage at Poudre River Diversion Dam Moves Forward

Words and Photos by Evan Stafford

AFTER MULTIPLE YEARS OF ADVOCACY BY AMERICAN Whitewater, the local outfitting community led by Rocky Mountain Adventures, and our nonprofit partners, the city of Fort Collins, CO has agreed to improvements that will allow for boat and fish passage at the Gateway Diversion Dam in the Lower Cache la Poudre River canyon. These dam modifications will restore aquatic connectivity and nearly double the length of the Filter Plant run, one of the river's most popular reaches and one of the few quality beginner whitewater runs in the area.

Installing fish passage at the dam that diverts Poudre River water for the city's municipal water use is a feature of the mitigation plan for the expansion of Halligan Reservoir in the upper reaches of the North Fork Poudre. Boat passage, however, was not a part of the plan until our coalition brought the concept to city planners. American Whitewater funded a site survey and concept design for combined boat and fish passage at the structure. The site survey was completed by Recreation Engineering & Planning, a firm who has previously modified dams for boat and fish passage at multiple sites across Colorado.

We extend our gratitude to the City of Fort Collins and Colorado Parks and Wildlife for their willingness to modify the fish passage plans. We also appreciate the coalition of local river outfitters who wrote multiple letters of support. Big shout out to Save The Poudre, whose settlement with Northern Water led to the creation of the $100 million Poudre River Improvement Fund. This fund played a large role in convincing the city that funding outside of the city budget would be available to make this project a reality.

"It has been my pleasure to work with the recreation community and Fort Collins city staff to see what can be done to add boat passage to the Gateway Dam," said Julie Pignataro, City of Fort Collins Council Member, District 2. "I am hoping that as this project moves forward, the collaboration between these entities in Northern Colorado and beyond can become a model for how our communities can work together to make great things happen."

Bonus update: Northern Water has also signaled it is open to exploring fish and boat passage modifications at the Munroe Canal Diversion. This diversion is a structure which, if improved, would restore the aquatic and recreational connectivity of the Wild and Scenic reaches of Poudre with the bottom six miles of river, all the way to the Picnic Rock access (essentially the mouth of the canyon). ■

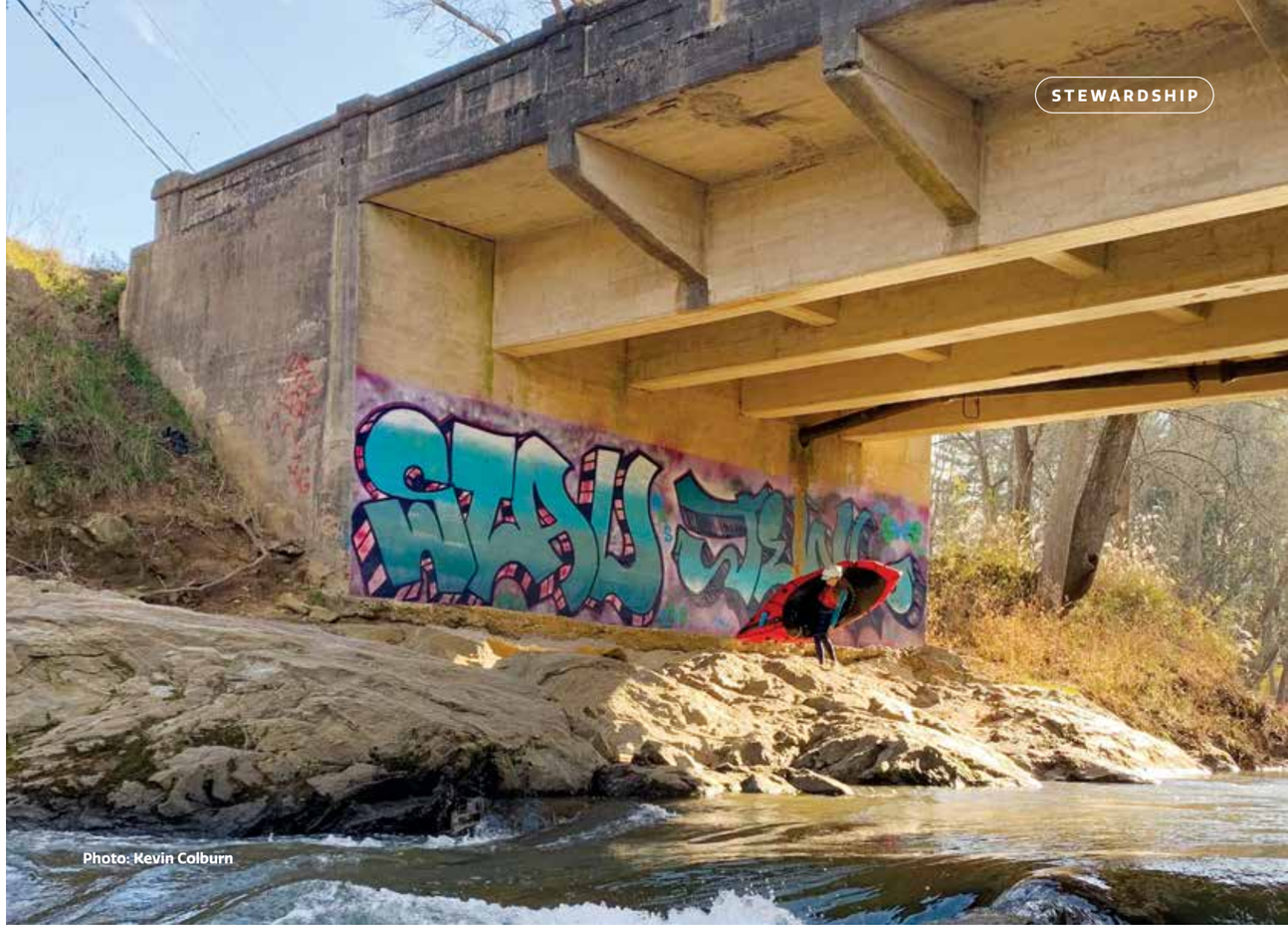


Photo: Kevin Colburn

Lawmakers Pull Back Bad Bridge Legislation in North Carolina

Kevin Colburn

Earlier this year, North Carolina legislators introduced a bill that would have made using public bridges over rivers as put-ins and take-outs illegal. Thankfully, the language criminalizing river access was recently removed from the bill, SB 220, and is no longer a threat. We'd like to thank the many boaters that reached out to your state legislators on this issue, and the legislators that changed course. Boater outreach helped inform the legislature to step back from a bill that would have had major consequences.

The public's right to travel on rivers is vital to the quality of life and economy in many areas of North Carolina and the United States more broadly. This right is under constant pressure from powerful interests who either don't understand the public's rights or want to end them. American Whitewater and the boating community are protectors of these rights for current and future generations. We rely on membership, donations, and activism from the river community to keep our waters open to the public. ■

A Unified Voice to Protect Public Lands

Our Shared Resources are Under Threat

Evan Stafford

THEY MAY NOT BE PERFECT, THEY MAY NOT be perfectly managed, but they are ours, and if we don't continue to fight and speak up for them, we may lose them. Federal public lands make up the backbone of our protected natural areas in this country. For us, the outdoors people, they define our way of life in ways almost no other national-level program does. Unfortunately, not everyone in national leadership positions feels the same way about these cultural and natural treasures as we do. Amongst policy makers, there is a dangerous movement gaining traction that intends to weaken, thoughtlessly extract resources from, and—unbelievably—straight-up sell off these public resources that every American is a collective owner of.

This decidedly negative transformation would turn our precious public lands, which have remained intact for generations, into a cash register for unconvincing short-term gains. Paying for tax cuts for the wealthy, extracting oil, timber, and minerals (often to sell to foreign countries), and cordoning off access for the privileged few who can afford to secure their own "nature retreat" is not the highest and best use of our public lands and waters.

Staffing and Funding Cuts

Managing huge swaths of land in the public interest requires substantial investment in personnel, infrastructure, and research. Though we are sometimes at odds with federal agencies' management decisions, we have always supported properly staffing and funding our land management agencies. Many times a lack of financial resources has played a significant role in our conflict with agencies. More often we work in close partnership with agencies working together to improve the user experience, but those partnerships only work when staff are in place to partner with. As frequent visitors to public lands for recreation, escape, solitude, fresh air, clean water, and more, boaters have a deep understanding of how relatively small investments can support sustainable outdoors opportunities and improvements in quality of life for many. Instead of taking jobs away from public lands management, we should be tapping into the potential of our shared lands for employing people in a way that encourages and supports visitation and the sustainable management of our lands and waters.

Photo: Mike Curiak

Photo: Evan Stafford

In a recent letter to Congress, American Whitewater along with 74 partners representing outdoor recreation leadership addressed the issue of insufficient funding for recreation visitation to America's public lands. This issue has been compounded by recent hiring freezes, pressure campaigns for early retirement, and widespread layoffs in the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM). These most recent cuts follow years of already declining funding, while visitation has rapidly increased. The letter specifically calls on lawmakers to fully fund recreation budgets in its Fiscal Year 2026 budget.

In 2024, a record 175.8 million Americans spent time recreating outdoors according to an Outdoor Industry Association report, a significant uptick in recreation participation. This statistic is an obvious signal that Congress needs to support and invest in public lands as their management equates to a huge portion of managing the national outdoor recreation economy in general. Outdoor recreation as a whole contributed $1.2 trillion to America's economy, supported 5 million jobs, and accounted for 2.3% of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product in 2023 according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. Funding public lands recreation programs is vital to maintaining our shared experiences on public lands.

We are seeing these staffing cuts and funding issues affect our work in public watersheds across the country. Important access areas that were greenlit for improvements on the Taylor River in Colorado and the Scott River in California are in potentially permanent holding patterns, as the Forest Service contends with grant allocation freezes and struggles to maintain enough staff to administer already allocated grants as they become "unfrozen." In Washington State, our survey of Harlequin Ducks on the Middle Fork Snoqualmie Wild and Scenic River has been upended by staff turnover, and a partnership project to invest in forest and aquatic health on the Olympic National Forest sits in limbo. Across the country, we are directly experiencing the abrupt loss of Forest Supervisors, recreation planners, and Wild and Scenic River planners and managers. These positions require a high level of experience and expertise that is not easily replaced. When these individuals leave, the tremendous investment in their education and training is lost along with the partnership relationships they have built with organizations like ours.

These issues are not potentialities of staffing and funding cuts for our public lands and waters. These are situations we are experiencing that affect our program work and that can be directly attributed to these ill-conceived and ineffective austerity measures.

Selling Off and Transferring Lands that are Collectively Ours

At the end of March, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Scott Turner and Interior Secretary Doug Burgum teamed up to pen an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal detailing their plan to work together to build affordable housing on federal lands. At the same time, multiple senators made statements identifying that concepts under discussion to help pay for a massive budget reconciliation bill include the sale of some lands around Western cities or national parks to developers to build low-income housing. While we support building affordable housing, opening up the selling of our public lands to developers to balance the federal budget is a bad idea. Especially if it's to support massive and unnecessary tax-cuts for a privileged few.

In the House, the Ways and Means Committee released a list of potential revenue generators for their version of the budget reconciliation bill, which included federal land sales. Meanwhile, the House rules package adopted in January waived the budget offset requirements for selling public lands that had previously been in place.

Waiving this requirement (Section 3c) means that public land sales and transfers can be treated as "budget neutral." This tactic is designed to make it look like giving away or selling public land would cost nothing, when to anyone who knows anything about our public lands, it's obvious that they provide valuable ecosystem services like clean air and water, are a significant source of government revenue, and form the foundation of the $1.2 trillion outdoor recreation economy mentioned earlier. Never mind that they are also clearly instrumental to the well-being of millions of citizens in hundreds of communities nationwide. National Parks, National Forests, BLM lands, and Wildlife Refuges are invaluable for the boating, climbing, hiking, camping, mountain biking, and skiing opportunities they provide. This seemingly innocuous rule essentially allows Congress to give away or sell public lands without considering their value, or the costs of giving them up, to the American people.

There has been widespread reporting that many members of Congress are considering public land sales as a way to raise revenue. The chairs of both the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, and the House Committee on Natural Resources, the two committees who have jurisdiction over such issues, have statements on their congressional web pages supporting the sale of public lands (Sen. Mike Lee, Utah and Rep. Bruce Westerman, AR-04). These statements, along with the actions in both the Senate and House budget reconciliation processes, suggest that many Congressional representatives believe that our public lands are their personal piggy bank, and that they have just been waiting for the right budget crisis to break it open.

Public Input May No Longer be Tolerated in Public Lands and Waters Decisions

Today, a majority of U.S. citizens can depend on clean, drinkable water to flow from their faucets and showers (180 million Americans get their drinking water from National Forests). We can step outside, breathe in deep lungfuls of fresh air, and make our way to a flowing stream to go for a swim or paddle without fear of getting sick. This, however, was not always the case. Polluted rivers caught fire, mining churned up riparian habitats, and industries far and wide used our rivers and creeks as dumping grounds for toxic waste.

Our air still isn't perfect, our clean water infrastructure is in need of repairs, and extractive industries continue to find ways to not only profit from our shared resources, but oftentimes to avoid absorbing the costs of the cleanup from their operations. We have come a long way though since the American public demanded stronger environmental regulations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time that saw what are considered our bedrock environmental bills become law. Laws like the Clean Water Act (CWA), the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) have played major roles in attempting to balance the needs of people and nature over the past 50 years.

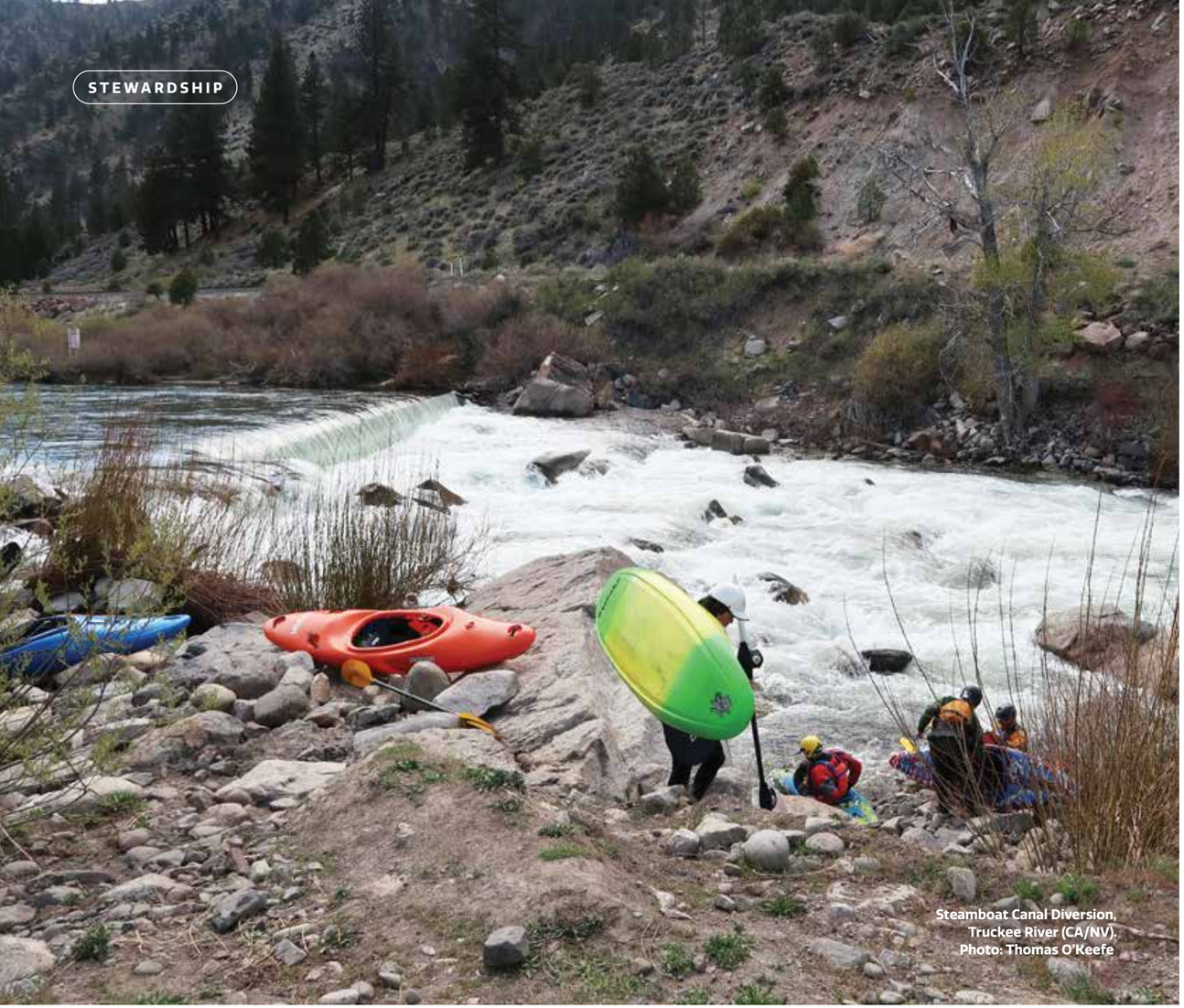
One of the major cornerstones of these laws, thanks to NEPA, is that when the federal government takes significant action, such as permitting a new dam, a new highway, or a new mine, it has to look at the environmental impacts of that action. NEPA requires agencies to consider alternatives that will have less environmental harm and provide meaningful opportunity for public input. These laws have made huge strides in holding industry and the government accountable, and in ensuring that those most affected by potentially harmful projects have a say in their approval.

These laws, and most importantly their application and implementation, are now under significant threat. These landmark legislative victories for rivers and the environment are, for the most part, enacted through regulatory rules and guidelines–essentially interpretations of how they should work on the ground. If the rules for how they work are removed or weakened, they no longer serve the law's intent or the public's interest.

In March, the EPA announced it was looking to eliminate 31 anti-pollution rules, including those that limit pollutants, protecting our rivers and creeks. Lee Zeldin, the EPA's administrator, cheered these rollbacks as the "greatest day of deregulation our nation has seen." There's no question that regulation can be messy and in singular cases appear overbearing, however without regulation we get things like the Cuyahoga River in Ohio catching fire–for what was at least the twelfth time–in 1969! On top of the rollback of rules, entire regulating bodies have been decommissioned, including this administration's removal of rulemaking authority from the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), the body that issues NEPA and Clean Water Act regulations. This move almost assures polluters greater power in fast tracking their projects without public oversight, not to mention causing an intentional state of regulatory chaos that inevitably leads to a build first, ask questions later approach to development on our public lands and in our public watersheds.

Call Your Congress People

Maybe you're not an heir to a corporate fortune. Maybe you don't own a home, or a car, or even the latest in technology. But do you know what is ours? The Grand Canyon, Yosemite, the Frank Church–River of No Return Wilderness, Gauley River National Recreation Area, the Flathead National Forest, and many, many more public lands units–belong to us collectively and are ours to steward. We hold the deed to 635 million acres of public lands and waters, and it's up to us to stand up and protect our assets from this wide-ranging set of current threats. Our message should be clear: Human-powered recreation needs healthy, protected public lands—and these places must remain in public hands. Our quality of life and massive recreation economies depend on it. We encourage you to reach out to your members of Congress and let them know how you feel about protecting our public lands by giving them a phone call directly (find their numbers at USA.gov) or by using our easy-action forms available at our website and in our social media profiles.



Steamboat Canal Diversion, Truckee River (CA/NV). Photo: Thomas O'Keefe

Connected Rivers Connect People and the Environment

Hattie Johnson

Peery's Mill Dam, Little River (TN)
Photo: Elan Young/Hellbender Press

AMERICAN WHITEWATER'S DATABASE OF WHITEWATER accidents and fatalities, maintained since 1972, documents that 10% of river fatalities nationwide are a result of individuals getting caught in a low head dam hydraulic. Low head dams, or weirs, are usually less than 15 feet high. Water flows over the top and falls steeply, creating a powerful hydraulic below the dam that can trap swimmers or boaters. Hence their nickname "drowning machines." These seemingly innocuous horizon lines create a dangerous hazard. Most paddlers have had a run-in with a low head dam in some capacity, whether it is a nasty surf, a tough portage, or worse. There are many incredible reaches of river that are cut off from use because of structures blocking navigation. American Whitewater has been working at the local, state, and federal level to address this public safety issue.

In 2019, Colorado's Department of Natural Resources invited American Whitewater to be on a steering committee about a low head dam safety initiative. The state initiated the project by doing a Google Earth-based inventory of all low head dam structures in the state. Once the inventory was published, an awareness campaign was launched that coincided with the runoff and summer season to help recreators be prepared for low head dam hazards. At the same time, American Whitewater worked with a volunteer group of dam safety professionals through the Task Force to Create a National Inventory of Low-head Dams. Through the group's work, an alpha version of the inventory was completed for all 50 states, finding over 13,000 low head dams across the country.

The importance of understanding where exactly low head dam structures are located became very clear through this work in Colorado. Our partners at the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership were aware of the state work American Whitewater was doing and asked if we would be interested in pursuing a national effort to address issues with low head dams. With partners in the recreation community, we developed a proposal for a low head dam inventory and technical assistance program to be administered by the Army Corps of Engineers. This would address both public safety issues and ecological issues with low head dams.

A national inventory of low head dams was established by Congress through the Water Resources Development Act in 2022 and then was refined in 2024 under the same title to ensure that these dams were housed under the umbrella of the national inventory of dams. This opens funding opportunities to address safety issues at these structures. American Whitewater continues to connect the work of the national task force with Army Corps of Engineers staff to move forward with a beta version of the inventory.

Knowing where these structures are located is a vital first step to comprehensively addressing removing dangerous barriers in rivers that harm recreators and aquatic habitats. American Whitewater is now leading an interdisciplinary group in Colorado to develop a statewide strategy to remove these hazards at a watershed scale in a way that maximizes both public safety, recreational enjoyment, and aquatic habitat benefits. This endeavor includes participants from state and federal agencies, foundations, business, and engineers putting their minds together on how to ensure rivers are a safer place for people to come together. ■

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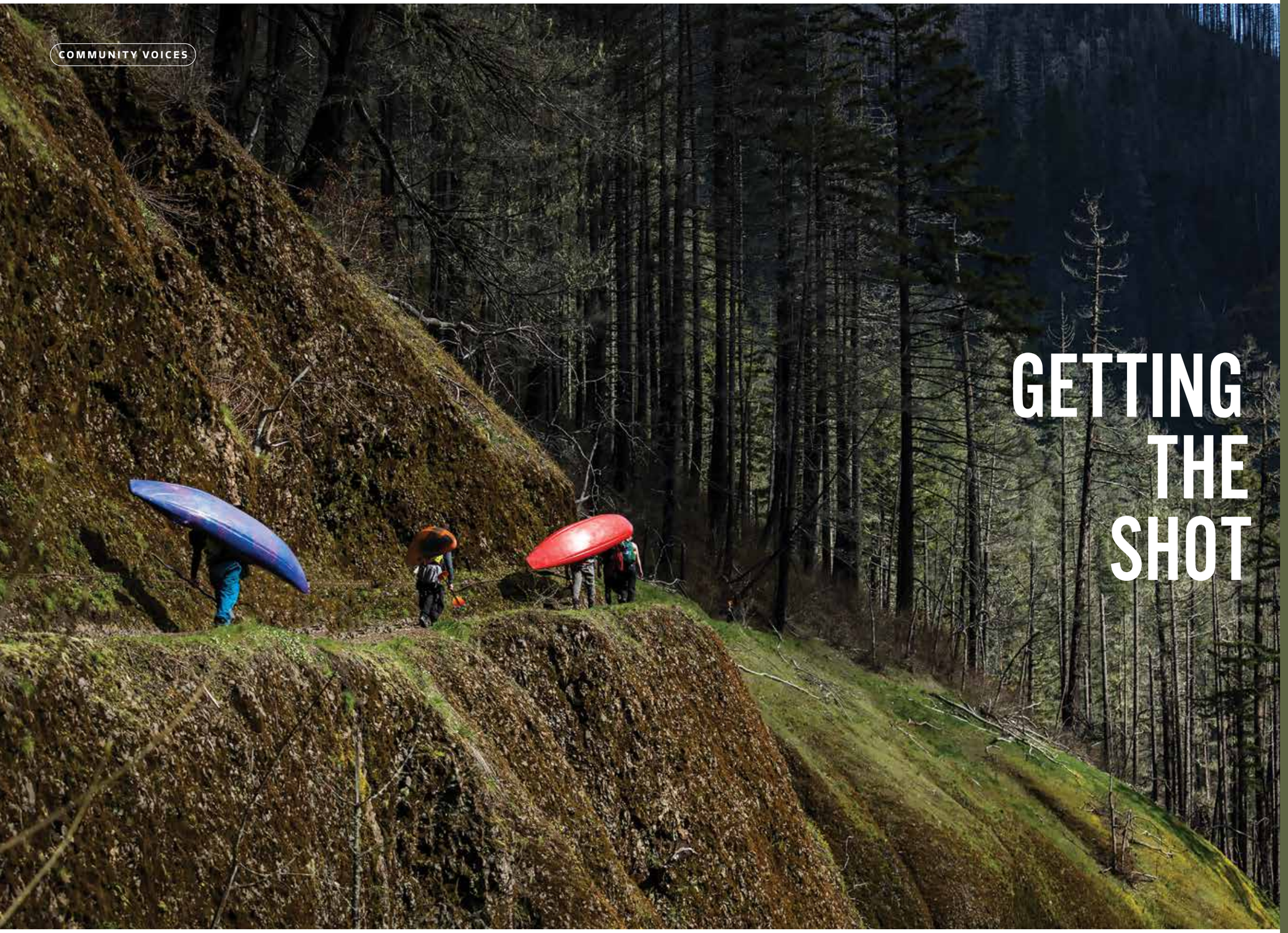


GETTING THE SHOT

THERE WAS NO SENSE OF SURENESS. Getting these shots was unpredictable from the start. We had our eyes set on Punch Bowl Falls in Oregon, although an unusual and inconsistent winter had not provided the Northwest with its usual lush and consistently moist winter. Punch Bowl is a highly sought-after waterfall by kayakers for its breathtaking location and stylish drop. Despite the uncertainty, I knew when I called Jordan Hartman that he wouldn't hesitate. Jordan is easily the most stylish kayaker I know and photographer. Not only is he a great kayaker, he is an incredibly close friend as well.

PUNCH BOWL FALLS

Words and photos by Riley Seebeck

The process of getting to Punch Bowl Falls was a long one with a two-mile hike each way. I knew the shot needed to be around "blue hour" which put us in the gorge at 6:30 p.m. Knowing the hike would take about one hour, we set off around 4 p.m. We were in a constant race for the perfect window of light. With kayaks on shoulders and hauling two bags myself, the trail laced the literal cliff edges of the gorge which took us past numerous cascading waterfalls that seemed to come out of holes directly in the walls of the canyon.

The trick to getting a great shot was going to lie in location. Arriving, we searched multiple points of entry and I realized I had two choices. I could swim across the flowing river or rappel down an unstable hillside with fresh deadfall. I decided to stick with a route that felt comfortable. I zipped my drysuit, packed my dry bag, flash, triggers, camera, and my 50mm 1.8f as well as 100-400mm 5.6f lens. The 100-400mm I knew would be the lens to use as the subject was going to be about a football field away. Strapped with a makeshift backpack strap, I jumped in the river and swam as hard as I could to stay as high above the next series of falls as possible. Though my drysuit was dry, it wasn't so warm when I fully swam.

The view upon arrival was well worth the cold. I climbed up a massive chunk of rock that had fallen a couple years prior. It was an eerie feeling to see straight above me where it came from, but the view was literally perfect. A log jam had stacked up which perfectly formed a V-shaped frame for the photograph.

Immediately, I knew we had limited light and the flash, carried by drone, needed to be tested quickly. I radioed Ilya, the drone pilot, in hopes he would see the flash test...nothing. Again, nothing.

Connection, frequency, line of sight... still nothing.

We knew the flash fired in the parking lot but this was a different game. Luckily, planning helped. I swam across the river again and Ilya ran a good 10 minutes down to the trail with a flash to try the different triggers we brought just in case. It was another incredible team effort on this project that astounded me. It worked. He ran another 10 minutes back up, like an absolute champ. The flash continued to fire.

Problem ten solved... out of twenty!

With blades spinning, Ilya launched the drone, getting it in sight of the falls. I wanted the flash to light up only the lip of the falls, giving off a spotlight effect.

"Down five feet, backwards two feet, no back up ten feet..." I rambled. Positioning was everything. Where was the flash? Struggling again to get a good connection, we landed the drone once more. One battery down, three left. Ilya changed the drone frequency and bam, fire, perfect location, perfect ambient light, it was time.

Immediately I radioed Jordan to fire it up, knowing this may be a one shot wonder. The falls are a 20-minute hike for the athlete and I knew that could be enough time for the light to change drastically. With my finger on the shutter and radio close, I calmed my breathing. Jordan popped into the first drop that leads to the falls.

Hold. Hold. Fire!

Jordan smoothly and under control planted the very last paddle stroke over the veil and I knew that would be it.

Click.

Elation.

All of our hard work came together and I felt as if I ran the falls myself. As a kayaker as well, I could relate to that feeling and knowing when that prime moment is going to present itself. We nailed it. I couldn't thank the team enough.

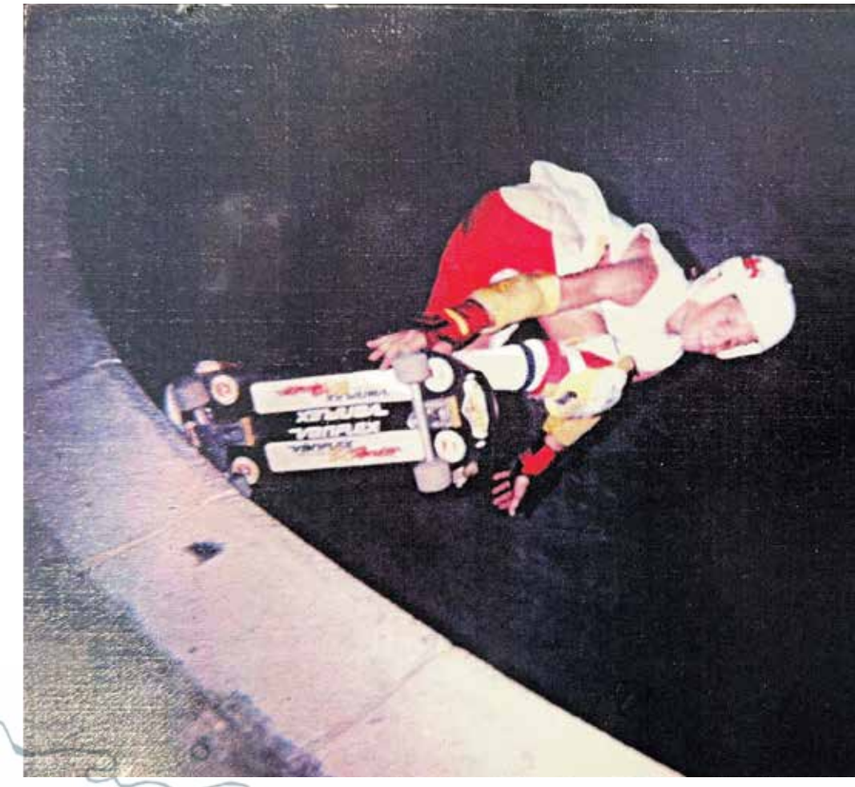
With darkness falling, we all came together at the top of the river trail. There were huge hugs, massive thanks, and even bigger stoke after showing everyone what we got.

My favorite thing about these shoots is the effort in togetherness. Everyone has a role and can stay calm and collected when speed bumps arise. I am forever grateful for this experience and am actively searching for the next one.

Framed prints available for sale at rileyseebeck.com/water

ON THE BIRTH OF MOUNTAIN *Surf* CULTURE

MIKE HARVEY



LET'S SAY YOU LIVE HUNDREDS, MAYBE THOUSANDS OF MILES FROM THE OCEAN. MAYBE YOU'RE LIKE ME GROWING UP IN CLEVELAND, OHIO, SKATEBOARDING AND…

…SNOWBOARDING AND DREAMING OF RIDING WAVES LIKE THE GUYS IN **THE ENDLESS SUMMER**. AS MUCH AS IT IS A SPORT, SURFING IS A LIFESTYLE. AS A KID IN THE 80s, I WORE THE CLOTHES AND LISTENED TO THE MUSIC OF SURF CULTURE.

In many ways, surfing is the foundational action sport. You might argue that all other action sports are derivative of surfing. Early surf culture introduced the concept of someone who is motivated by the stoke of riding waves, instead of the desire to make money or climb the professional ladder. As a kid, I was captivated by this image. I knew I had to learn how to surf.

Moving to the mountains of Colorado when I was 18 didn't get me closer to that dream. But I did learn to paddle a kayak through whitewater and that you could use your boat to surf standing waves on rivers. After a fun session in my kayak, sipping a beer at the take-out in the golden light, with water dripping off my skin, I felt the stoke all the same.

In 1993, during that first summer in Colorado, I met a guy through mutual friends who had grown up a surfer. Zack was one of the coolest guys I had known. He kayaked in real surf trunks and had grown up surfing the waves of Southern California near his home in San Diego.

Zack and I became friends and paddling partners. Later, in the late 90s, our shared love of the Arkansas River led us both to settle in Salida, Colorado. I started working on developing whitewater features in downtown Salida and eventually became a whitewater park designer with Recreation Engineering and Planning. Zack and I continued to have adventures together: skating the Salida Skatepark, riding mountain bikes, snowboarding, and paddling whitewater.

Zack, on the other hand, had always been the consummate designer. He would get a new kayak and immediately begin to tear apart the outfitting and figure out ways to make it better. In 2005, I completed a whitewater park project in Pueblo, Colorado. I went for an inspection the first summer at high water and saw people surfing one of the waves we had built–on surfboards!

I was aware of river surfing. I had seen a few folks surfing a wave that comes up on the Colorado River during big runoff years called Big Sur. But, to me, river surfing was more of a novelty. Seeing people surfing a wave I had helped build for kayakers in Pueblo got me fired up! I immediately called Zack and we traveled down to Pueblo with some boards.

For the first time in my life, I surfed a wave from a standing position, not sitting on my butt in a kayak. Of course, with Zack's background, he ripped immediately and I sucked. But no matter–I was a surfer! A video of one of these early sessions still lives on YouTube. On our drive home from that session, Zack immediately dove into how the boards we rode, designed for riding waves in the ocean, were not ideal for surfing a river.

He went home and started watching surfboard shaping videos on YouTube. He bought some blue board home insulation, fiberglass, and epoxy resin and made his first-ever river surfboard. He modeled it after the fish shapes he rode as a kid in the summer in mushy waves. The thought behind the design was that a fatter, wider board would be the best tool for surfing river waves. A mutant fish. A Badfish. That same first board now hangs on the wall at the Badfish Surf Shop in Salida. It's a reminder of where we came from and an inspiration for where the sport of river surfing is headed. ■

Editor's note: In 2009, Zack and Mike started Badfish and they now manufacture a wide-range of performance inflatable paddleboards, river surfboards, rafts, and river tubes. Badfish is a proud supporter of American Whitewater's river stewardship program.

The Perfect Daze of Memory

Words and photos by Peter Stekel

MY CONCEPT FOR THE IDEA OF A PERFECT DAY COMES from an essay by Loren Eiseley that I first saw in a magazine and later tracked down in 1979 (according to the note I wrote on the inside cover) to his memoir, All the Strange Hours. Eiseley was a popular and important essayist, especially when urbanites were first recognizing their forgotten connection to nature. It was the 70s.

In the decades since his 1977 death, Eiseley seems to have been buried in memory... to our detriment. He had–has–a lot to say (in his reserved early 20th century mid-continent manner) about life, death, and memory. He spoke about who or what we are and how everything is everything. He asked, what if I don't believe there is a God (amid the thousands worshiped now or in the past?) but why is it that sometimes it seems as if there has to be a God or how else can you explain evolution? Or, even, coincidence? Or a million galaxies beyond our own Milky Way?

I will admit, when I first read him, in my inexperience in life, I did not know what he wrote about when he wrote of bumming around. He wrote of riding the rails in the depression era of the 1930s. That is when his essay about his perfect day takes place. Four young men around a railroad water tower in anywhere America, drinking grape soda, for the love of Mike! Even, for Pete's sake!

What drew me in to Eiseley, and continues to draw me in as I cull books from my shelves and send them unread to the Little Free Library down the street, is the idea of a perfect day. I can't cull this memoir because I do not want to lose connection to that idea. I know about such days. They are fuzzy and uncertain in the daze of memory.

For another thing, Eiseley was an exacting writer and such a scientist that his work is replete with definitions,qualifications, and digressions of explanation of his words and terms. He had to have been an exacting and precise scientist because he was such a wordsmith.

Thus his description of his perfect day.

Eiseley admits right at the start, exactly from the get-go, he is remembering the "last of my drifting days." Though what day, month, or year is lost in that daze of memory. Only that, "It was for me the most perfect day in the world and that is why I retain its memory, safely severed from time and reality."

He easily admits that such a day in memory is subjective, not objective, and never the same for one or the other of us. For some, "It will be the memory of a woman, or a fading bar of music, or a successful night at a gambling table," each leaving the ephemeral illusion that you have won the game of life."

"The world can always wait when one is young," and four young men are drinking soda on a heavenly wooden platform beneath a railroad water tower. With nowhere to go and nothing to do when they got there, the boys are stretched out in the perfection of youth." As he says, they are people, "Going nowhere." And going there fast and directionless and in no hurry. That is, Eiseley is describing a moment or so when time doesn't stand still. It stops. Stillness is something else. Stopping is when feeling overcomes thought and embraces and absorbs reality.

Oddly, what defines this stopping the most is a feeling of being alone, but not of loneliness. It's more akin to being connected to time instead of not. So, back to that reconciling God and time enough for evolution. Or time enough for God. Paradoxically a time when there is no time worthy of being hurried because time takes time to be itself. Time. And time has plenty of time. I mean, where does it have to be? That is the idea of stopping time.

I have experienced my share of personal perfect Eiseley days when time ceased to be. When time did not matter because time was not there. Curiously, in my memory, it happened when I felt time the most intimately. Or, correctly, I felt its absence.

One experience was in the High Sierra of California at a glacial amphitheater known as the Tablelands. It is a basin of rock, meadow, mosquito, tarn and lake, creeks and springs everywhere, subalpine forest, fell field, with an unmistakable structural resemblance to Rome's Colloseum.

I was there on the Tablelands one sad day, leaving one of its tarns with a friend where we had taken his wife's ashes so that she would forever be in the Sierra Nevada she dearly loved. Our duty behind us, because of glacial geology, we easily made our way down a long series of deep and broad coliseum stairways that crossed declivities of full spring-on wildflower blooms. A quartering wind nudged us gently like the old man's friend. I could feel his helping hand though I'm certain it was her hand. A gentle touch embraced us, as in a cloud. It was not possible to ignore or feel the hand of nature. Loren Eiseley would have wondered what was God and what was not because it could not be explained.

How to describe that wind? The soft touch from a new and tenuous lover. Dancing across with pleasurably new delight across the same but not the same skin bringing the same but new and different pleasure. The same and new before familiar and old. Special and perfect in that new love.

Like a lover you know will not last so long as a night or a week I became aware of that touch of wind. As quickly as I recognized it, then it was gone and I lost the feeling. A breath across my face. A goodbye to that want, to hold onto before it turns sour. Before I became aware of it, for a brief moment, I felt not surrounded by nature but part of it. That kind of feeling cannot last.

Another perfect day was a day during a week on a river. The Green in Utah. Red rocks and the Stillwater stretch. This is like the Grand, the Big Ditch, but without the rapids. It was lazy days of floating brownish water in open canoes. It was not only fish that may go with the flow. Canyon wrens jeered but who was to mind? The sun beat down. The air was still. Calmness pervaded for those late afternoon up-canyon winds.

We oozed with the water, soft and subtle downriver in suspension as the mud that fills the river bed. Suspended in time and place and belonging to neither but to a netherworld where eddies are vague as the current. There were cliffs. Beaches. Tamarisk. Blue sky. A contrail made by people moving coast to coast with more important things to do. Again, time. Being weightless. Time being time.

Then. A vision! Kokopelli on the ridgetop. In classic pose. Bent over her flute. She was there and was gone in the time it takes to see and make a sound.

From the stern, a friend asked, "You OK?"

"Yes," I croaked. "I thought I saw something." I keep that "something" to myself. For now it's special and worthy of sharing for later when tales and stories will be told, believed or not believed, over drinks and chips.

And, finally, there is again, another time.

Another perfect day.

It was years before these other days but, as it is the first, it's the most wondrous and significant of them all.

In those days I was working for the Bureau of Land Management in southern Idaho on a vegetation project.

Water of any kind was miles away.

On this particular day my project required me to carry my sampling gear atop a butte of lava.

The access was via a rocky chute, and I clambered over black boulders. Because I was young and strong and knew not about fear of falling, injury, or slipping a long way unto death, I thought not of danger but of work and challenge and the joy and fun of doing something I like versus something I must do required by employment. I like to climb. For this day, all that mattered was climbing. To the top.

Work could wait. I was being paid to climb. It was a Class III+ climb, for you climbers out there.

The day was hot. Sweat leaked out of my face, flowing from my face in sheets, dripping to the earth. It soaked into my shirt and teamed my eyeglasses. My face was flushed from exertion and the heat. *You should have worn sunscreen*, my mother's voice whispered in my ear. *And a hat.*

OK. It is hot. Surprise! Well, after all, it is Idaho in summer.

I reached the top of the bluff and threw my leg over the rimrock like I was mounting a bicycle. I pulled myself flat onto and over the edge, panting with exertion. Then, I rested. Caught my breath.

Time. Yes. Time stopped.

Then there was a panting breath upon my face. There was a dog. A German Shepard. Grey and shaggy, gaunt and hungry-looking. Its tongue was hanging out and dripping saliva. Like mouth sweat. Breathing down my neck. What was a dog doing up here where not even a herd of sheep or cattle are expected? I mean, I was only here because I had to be here, looking for forage which I already knew would not be here because it is a butte of lava where noth-ing grows but bits of sagebrush and rabbit brush and cheatgrass. A German Shepherd?

I mean, really?

The dog licked my face. Whinnies. Oh, the salt! It took a step back when I shuddered with surprise. Stepped forward. Stepped back. Playfully. It lunged. Like you see when a dog has a tennis ball and wants to play catch. It whinnied again. Turned and sauntered off. I can swear it shrugged its shoulders as if in disbelief that the human didn't want to play ball.

Only then did I realize this was not a dog. It was a coyote.

And what made this the most perfect day in the world? For all the time I have spent in the wilderness, trying to touch the wild, this is the only time the wild has reached out to touch me. ■

Peter Stekel is an Enduring Rivers Circle member, a group of river loving individuals who have made bequests on behalf of American Whitewater. To learn more contact bethany@americanwhitewater.org

Recivilized: Washing Away The Wild

Haley Robinson

THE FIRST BUILDING I STEP INTO AFTER TWENTY DAYS on the river is a desolate gas station off Highway 93 near the Nevada border. The artificial lights are brighter than the Arizona sun and the air is so heavily perfumed that my temples ache. I head for the restroom and stand in front of a mirror for the first time in three weeks, taking a look at what the Colorado River did to me.

I notice my eyebrows have become bushy and unkempt. It feels strange to care about the width of my eyebrows again. Later, I will pluck them back to the shape that women on Instagram tell me is acceptable. When I think of the 15 people I was with on the river, I don't remember their unruly body hair. I don't remember wrinkles or blemishes. I remember the focus in their eyes as they scouted dangerous sections of the river. I remember the smiles that cracked wide when we all made it through Lava Falls without flipping. I remember how the vibrant colors of their dry suits stood in stark contrast to the beautiful browns, greens, and reds that decorate the desert.

I leave the restroom and buy a bag of chips after pausing to remember my PIN. Interacting with the teller is uncomfortable. I don't recognize his face, the way it moves, or the cadence of his voice. I retreat back to the car filled with my river comrades and we continue our drive home. Being in the car together almost feels like a day on the boat. We are still together, repeating our favorite jokes and speaking with the honesty and candor that the wilderness draws from people.

That night, in the cheap plastic bathtub of a Super 8 in Beaver, Utah, I set to work grooming the traces of adventure from my body. I watch as hundreds of tiny hairs accumulate at the bottom of the tub as I shave them off my legs. They pile up as they are swept away by the water and remind me of the driftwood we collected for fires in the canyon. At night, the driftwood fires on the beach roared with almost as much fervor as our laughter — echoing off the canyon's deep walls, breaking through the quiet of the desert, and joining the chorus of the churning river. Now, in the blinding fluorescent light, I miss the darkness and joy of those nights — the glow of my new friend's faces, illuminated by fire.

Setting the razor on the slippery edge of the tub, I stand to wash my hair. It has become unruly and wild — blown by the canyon's winter winds, soaked in clear blue ponds at the bottom of cliffside waterfalls, and saturated in smoke. As the water hits the top of my head, a plume of campfire smell brings tears to my eyes. I'm overwhelmed with memories of the idle nights drinking, smoking, laughing. Return me to the canyon that replaces feelings of urgency with curiosity, and nerves with wonder. I pour artificial flower-scented shampoo into my hand and rinse the smell of fire and human down the drain.

When the shower is over, I am unnaturally slippery and clean. The sand from the canyon has been washed away from under my fingernails, between my toes, and in my ears. Every grain holds weight in my heart. On Christmas Day, those grains turned to mud when a sudden hail storm overtook our camp. We stood under makeshift tarp shelters dressed in Santa hats and pajamas, laughing and celebrating the delightful absurdity of our existence. On an unusually warm day, we laid on the sand at Mohawk camp absorbing every ray of sun that touched our skin. On our last night on the river, after the canyon walls had given way to silty canal banks and exposed us to the true cold of January, we sat on the sandy beach as it accumulated frost, linked arms, and howled at the moon.

It is surprising to me how slow and how fast twenty days went by. I am surprised by how little I missed the internet, how much I loved my face and body without beauty products, and how close I felt to people who were strangers less than a month ago. I notice the uniformity of my civilized life in a new way. Every hotel room is a carbon copy of each other. Desks, windows, and televisions have sharp lines and 90-degree corners. Every day in the canyon was a different texture. Some of the beaches stretched wide, welcoming us with sandy shores and ample firewood. I walked barefoot on those days, relieving my feet from suffocating wool socks and boots. Other camps were carved into dark rocky ledges that accumulated pools of water as the river levels ebbed and flowed. Some days we hiked in canyon river beds with layered walls and pools so deep our toes couldn't touch the bottom. One mountainside was covered in plants and rocks sharp enough to draw blood. Spiny branches reached out and presented an unforgiving challenge — scattering scratches across our arms and legs. I can still see some of the scrapes on my freshly cleaned skin.

A couple of days later, when I arrive home, I shower for the third time since I stepped out of the Colorado River. When the water hits my hair, I can still smell the smoke. ■

Photo: Scott Blankenfeld

Prepared For The Unthinkable

Accessibility to an AED turned a river tragedy into a story of inspiration

Kimmie Gould

JOE ELLIS, A FATHER OF TWO AND A PHYSICAL education teacher at a high school in Fair Oaks, California, never anticipated that a routine day on the river would change his life forever. But after a near-fatal incident while working as a whitewater rafting guide, he has become an advocate for the widespread availability of Automated External Defibrillators (AEDs) for commercial outfitters, private rafters, kayakers, and all outdoor enthusiasts.

In May of 2023, Ellis was guiding a commercial rafting trip on the South Fork of the American River in Coloma, California. Everything seemed normal at the put-in as he pumped his raft. Then, about 45 minutes into the day, he began to feel a strange sensation in his chest—a slight burn that quickly escalated into a lump in his throat. Realizing something was wrong, he blew his whistle to alert the safety kayaker and they pulled over at a nearby county park, one of the few public access points before the river veers away from accessible roads.

Minutes later, Ellis collapsed. He had suffered a widowmaker heart attack, caused by a complete blockage of the left anterior descending artery. Unconscious for four minutes, Ellis was revived thanks to the swift actions of his fellow guides, who had an AED on hand. Ellis was carrying the AED in his boat, as he was the sweep boat - the last boat in line - that day. "How fast they got the AED on me, coupled with being well-prepared and delivering quality CPR, is the reason why I'm here today," Ellis said. In contrast, an AED located in the boathouse at the county park only 75 feet away was locked behind doors, inaccessible when it was most needed.

Ellis credits his physical fitness for his relatively quick physical recovery, but the emotional toll has been harder to bear. He now packs an AED on every trip, fearing that another incident could happen while he's out in the wilderness or even during his physical education work. "I don't want to have an incident in front of my children, students, or friends," he shared. This sense of responsibility has led him to advocate for AEDs not just in commercial rafting businesses, but for all rafters, kayakers, and agencies surrounding the sport, especially those venturing into remote areas.

The importance of carrying an AED while on the river, whether guiding commercial trips or enjoying private outings, cannot be overstated. Running rivers, especially those in remote areas, presents unique challenges for emergency response, and access to emergency services is often limited. In these circumstances, a portable AED is a potentially life-saving tool that can make the difference between life and death. With some models weighing less than three pounds, an AED can be easily stored in a drybag or watertight box.

Ellis's experience also highlights the crucial issue of maintaining access to lifesaving equipment such as AEDs at popular river access points, both public and private, and even camp-grounds where possible. It's essential that these services remain accessible, and that agencies and outfitters start to prioritize access to this life-saving equipment.

Sudden cardiac arrest is a leading cause of death in the U.S., causing around 365,000 deaths per year. It can strike anyone, at any time, regardless of age or fitness level. As stated by the American Heart Association, survival rates for sudden cardiac arrest are shockingly low at 11%, but that number can jump to nearly 70% if defibrillation occurs within the first three to five minutes of collapse.

The investment in an AED is modest compared to the potential cost of losing a life. At about $1,400 per device, the cost of an AED is a small price to pay for peace of mind.

Ellis encourages those working in the outdoor industry, as well as private rafters and kayakers, to educate themselves on basic CPR and AED usage. "Though it is always a good idea to take a course, you don't need to be certified to save someone's life. You just need to know how to perform hands-only CPR and use the AED," he said. "The difference it could make is immeasurable."

Ellis emphasizes the importance of running emergency drills and training regularly, particularly for commercial rafting businesses. "For any company or organization, having emergency

Photo: Scott Blankenfeld

drills in place for situations like cardiac arrest can be lifesaving," he noted. "It's crucial to practice CPR, AED usage, and other emergency protocols such as post trauma communication and evacuation logistics so everyone is prepared when an incident occurs. Being trained and prepared isn't just a safety precaution; it's a responsibility."

Ellis was working for American Whitewater Expeditions in Coloma, California, at the time of his incident, and he was fortunate that they carry AEDs on all of their commercial trips. His experience has already inspired positive changes. The American River Resort, a campground Ellis frequents in the summer, has moved its AEDs to outdoor enclosures that are accessible to guests at any time. Additionally, El Dorado County Parks, where Ellis's incident took place, has installed AEDs in purpose-built enclosures that are secure from weather, animals, and tampering, while remaining accessible 24 hours a day. But Ellis's work is far from over. His mission is to ensure that all rafters and kayakers—commercial guides, private adventurers, and everyone in between—have access to AEDs when in remote locations with limited emergency services. "I left on a raft trip, experienced the last day of my life, and fortunately lived to tell about it," Ellis said. "This is a testament to the importance of having direct access to an AED on the river."For commercial outfitters, guides, and private boaters alike, carrying an AED while venturing into the wild can be the difference between life and death. ■

Editor's Note: For more information about AEDs on the water and off, call Joe Ellis at 916-216-1408 / joe@aedteam.com / www.aedoutdoors.com.

High Water Dangers are Real!

Lessons From Surging Flows on the French Broad, Illinois, and Cheat Rivers

Charlie Walbridge

French Broad with signs of extreme flooding during Hurricane Helene. Photo: Kevin Colburn

HOW DOES A POOR JUDGMENT CALL TO BOAT RISING water happen? We've all had the experience of driving a long distance for a trip or event and finding high water on arrival. There is excitement and nervousness as we each decide whether to put on. The energy is contagious and seductive. Because big surges in water levels are rare, we don't always notice that a river's character has crossed a dangerous line. Long periods of hard rain should get your attention. If the river's color changes from clear to brown, it's a sure sign of high water. Water higher than bank full and rushing through trees near the shore increases risk. When the river level is rising visibly, as you stand there, it's a clear warning. The presence of debris in the river means rapidly rising flows. Never get on a river when large debris like trees are on the move. Here are examples from three rivers that illustrate the dangers of high water.

The French Broad River

I was recently contacted by a group that experienced a frightening near-miss on a rapidly rising French Broad River in North Carolina. This incident occurred over five years ago during an instructor-training class led by a well-known expert paddler. It was a very close call and the memories from the day are still strong. The story is worth telling because it's a mistake that any of us could make.

On the morning of April 19, 2019, it was raining heavily. The river was already running high at 5000 cfs, when six students and the instructor put in on Section 9 to run what is normally a Class II-III run with one Class IV. Heavy rain continued throughout the day, and the flow rose to 18,500 cfs by the time the group reached the midpoint access at Stackhouse. The river was clearly on the rise, and it later crested at over 65,000 cfs! Although the class was officially over, the group's vehicles were downstream in Hot Springs. The instructor said he didn't pressure the group, but members of the group felt he did. Enthusiasm grew. One student took out, but the rest paddled downstream.

This is when things got ugly. Here are two accounts from the paddlers who experienced it.

Caleb Parchman writes: "As we approached Needle Rock Rapid we tried to catch the eddy on the right side of a very large wave train. Near the bottom of the rapid, our boats hit powerful cross currents that flipped everyone except for the instructor. We had long, exhausting swims through numerous holes and waves. As we approached Frank Bell's Rapid we were exhaust-

ed. We chose to swim to a clump of trees on an island that was completely submerged.

"At this point, I still had hold of my boat and my paddle. As I approached the trees, I caught a log strainer on my lower ribs and was forced to let go of both. After I lifted myself up and flushed over the log I was able to hold onto a tree. I eventually swam to a spot where a co-participant was standing on a pile of wood pinned against a tree. The other two swimmers were on another debris pile about 40 yards river left of us. It was about 4:30 p.m. and we estimated the water level to be over 35,000 cfs. The water continued to rise and the wood continued to build up and break off. Eventually, two kayakers came by and we were able to whistle them to our location. They pulled Ryan and Tom behind their kayaks to shore and came back up to help us at about 8:30 p.m."

Tom Wellender writes: "Our situation was precarious. I stood on a raft of logs grasping a skinny tree that was bending under the strain. Waves made the pile rise and fall like it was inhaling and exhaling. Each time another tree or log came downstream and rammed into the pile, the concussion shook the tree. I felt like a wet rag standing on the rollers of a laundry wringer.I was ready for the strainer to break apart any moment and chew me up. We periodically caught the attention of our friends on the other island and traded pat on the head gestures to indicate we were okay for the moment.

"After being marooned for 45 to 60 minutes, we saw two kayakers floating downstream. They seemed alarmed and confused by what they saw. They floated downstream and out of sight, but a short while later, we saw them walking upstream on the river right train tracks carrying their kayaks. They paddled out to us and landed at the downstream end of the near island. Our friends advised the kayakers to help us first since they thought we were in more danger than they were.

"The kayaker said that he was going to tow me to Hot Springs behind his kayak. He gave me three simple instructions: 1) hold onto his stern, 2) kick as hard as I can, and 3) if he capsizes, let go until he rolls up and tells me to grab on again. I was terrified but determined. I hung my paddle by its grip as high as I could reach in the fork of a branch before we left. It was later recovered 15 feet above the river surface! It was wonderful to be off that wood pile, and it didn't take long to cover the downstream distance to Hot Springs. After we landed, the kayaker departed immediately, carrying his kayak back up the railroad tracks to rescue our friends."

It's easy to be smug when hearing about such an error in judgment. But it's not hard to see how it could happen. Here are two more examples from the American Whitewater Accident Database.

The Illinois River

From March 21 to March 23, 1998 three inches of warm rain fell on snowpack in the Siskyou Mountains in Southern Oregon. The Illinois River, a multi-day Class IV-V trip, rose over 15 feet, from 1,700 cfs to over 17,000 cfs. Since the river is normally run between 900 and 3,000 cfs, the sudden surge caused havoc with weekend river runners. Several parties never launched. A single crew got out ahead of the surge. One group hiked back to the put-in after the flow doubled overnight; another chose to stay put and was eventually rescued by helicopter. Two parties had flips in or near the Class V Green Wall Rapid that resulted in fatalities. Coast Guard rescue helicopters picked up six people who were stranded in a sheer-walled section of the canyon.

On the morning of March 21, Jeff Alexander, 37, launched in a small raft, paddling tandem with a partner. This group of experienced West Virginia river guides also included three kayaks. They portaged the Green Wall the next day and planned to do the same at the Little Green Wall downstream. But the raft missed the take-out eddy and capsized in a pourover. Mr. Alexander's drysuit neck gasket had been repaired with duct tape. When he hit the water, the seal blew out. Water poured in and swimming became impossible. Party members saw him floating underwater for long periods despite his PFD. His partner washed five miles downstream before she reached shore. The group recovered and secured Mr. Alexander's body, then two of the three kayakers paddled out to get help. One of the kayakers and Mr. Alexander's partner were evacuated by helicopter the following day.

A three raft trip with very experienced crews also launched on March 21 and reached the Green Wall the next day. Two of the three boats flipped in a huge 15-foot wave at the top of the rapid. Their boats were washed downstream. The third boat made it through the first wave and rescued Wilbur Byars, 62. After they were sure the others were safe on shore, they left to get help. They peeled out and flipped. After checking the boat to be sure that Mr. Byars wasn't trapped inside, his partner swam for shore. There he saw Mr. Byars In the distance floating face down. He was later found washed up on shore, face up but unresponsive. Surviving members of the group tried to climb out of the gorge and were eventually picked up by Coast Guard helicopters.

The Cheat River

Another high-water surge caused havoc for a commercial rafting trip on West Virginia's Cheat River. The Cheat is notorious for sudden increases in water levels; that's how it got its name. On the weekend of June 6,1981, the river was rising rapidly. On Friday morning it was just under 2.5 feet; by 11 p.m. it was at 4.5 feet and coming up fast. By 6 a.m. Saturday, the river had reached six feet; by 8 a.m. it was running close to eight feet. The outfitter, Mountain Streams and Trails, was the oldest and most experienced company on the river. Although the Cheat was still rising, they knew it seldom got much past eight feet, and they had run the river several feet higher. They decided to transfer their trips from the Canyon to the easier Narrows section upstream as they often did when the water got high. The river ultimately crested at 14 feet, well past the outfitter's cutoff, and the floodwaters pulled considerable debris into the current. When their trips arrived at the put-in it was evident that the Cheat was still on the rise. Quantities of debris, including whole uprooted trees, were floating down the river. A raft, originally placed near the shore, soon floated free. After the first trip launched, a raft collided with a floating log, puncturing a tube and banging up one of the guides. By this time the second trip, moving hard on the heels of the first, capsized a raft in a series of huge waves. All hands were picked up except for one person, who found himself marooned on a midstream rock. This rock is found on the shoreline at normal flows! By this time, the company owner, observing the rising gauge at Albright and the problems upstream, drove up to the put-in and cancelled all further trips.

Now the guides had to get their guest off the rock. River manager John Lichter maneuvered his kayak into the eddy below the victim and did not like what he saw. The river was continuing to rise, and there was less and less space for the stranded guest to stand. Just downstream was a massive log jam, so an approach by raft would be extremely dangerous. In addition, many snakes were clinging to the rock. The presence of these creatures, who were too preoccupied with survival to be very hostile, was nerve-wracking!

Then, Rowlesburg Civil Defense, which serves as a rescue squad for the Narrows, "closed" the river. Any further action by the trip guides would have to be done with them. A helicopter in the area was called in by the rescue squad. Shouting across the water, they discussed the alternatives with Lichter. The victim was banged up and badly shaken. The approach to the rock was treacherous even for an expert kayaker, much less for a raft. A "chopper" was the best alternative, and Lichter waved his agreement. The machine came in and the pilot placed one skid on the rock and hovered as the victim entered. They later arrived safely at Camp Dawson, a National Guard training area just downstream.

Paddlers should always be cautious when the water is rising. Although you may get encouragement from excited paddlers, close friends, or instructors, the decision to run a river is yours alone. Don't allow yourself to be pressured by others, or by your own expectations or ambitions. Listen to your gut. It may keep you safe! ■

Accident Reporting: Near-Misses

Near-misses occur when there is an incident on the river that does not involve serious injury or death, but does involve a dangerous situation where rescue of people or gear takes place. You can help American Whitewater track, and our community learn from, near-miss incidents! To make a report, go to americanwhitewater.org/safety and fill out the online form. You can also contact ccwalbridge@cs.com or message Charlie Walbridge on Facebook. First-hand accounts are best, but providing some information, often provides enough for us to then find the full story. Everything that comes in will be posted on the American Whitewater Accident Database Facebook Page, and those interested are encouraged to follow us there.

Find all of our online safety materials and the most recent American Whitewater accident summary at americanwhitewater.org/safety

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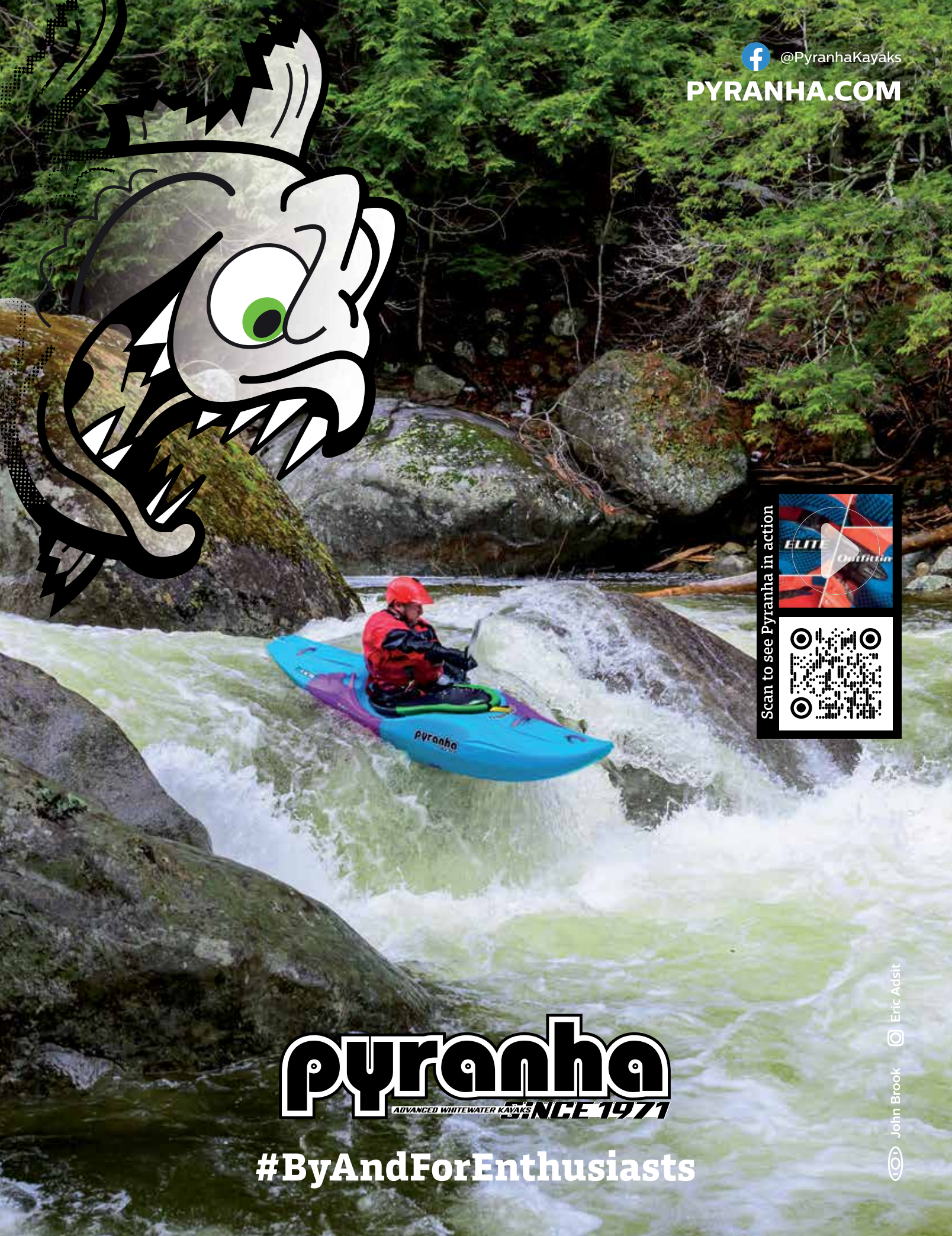
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