

## A river is lost: what way forward?

*Guy McCarthy*

*Published May 23, 2019 at 05:57PM*



Larry Orman Rafters run a rapid with wood paddles on the Stanislaus River in 1972. Stanislaus River Archive / [www.stanislausriver.org](http://www.stanislausriver.org) /

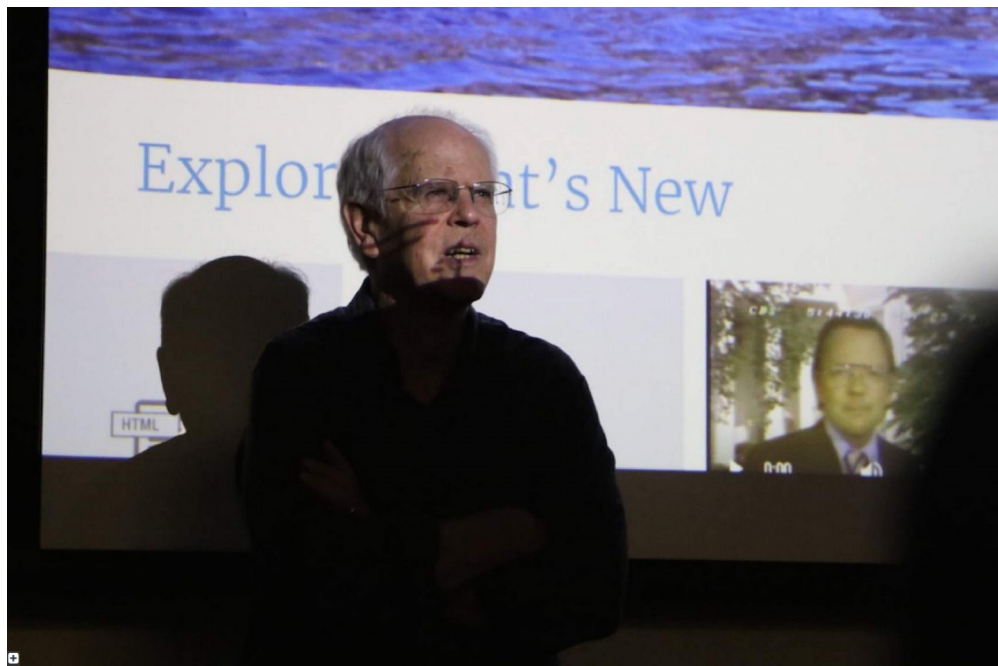
They lost a battle so devastating some still refuse to look at New Melones Reservoir.

Before photos are labeled “Live River.” After photos are labeled “Dead River.”

Activists who opposed the flooding of Stanislaus River rafting runs 40 years ago spoke Wednesday night of how they can try to share their loss, and their lessons learned, with younger generations.

More than 50 people jammed into a narrow room at Tuolumne County Library on Greenley Road. About half of them boated the old Stanislaus rapids before New Melones covered them up in the early 1980s.

Larry Orman, a veteran rafting guide who helped spearhead efforts during the 1974 ballot Prop 17 campaign to save the Stanislaus River, spoke before and after a short video titled “Small Things — Requiem for the Stanislaus River.”



Veteran river guide Larry Orman speaks Wednesday night at a gathering at Tuolumne County Library in Sonora.  
(Guy McCarthy / Union Democrat)

A requiem is an act of remembrance, Orman explained. The pain of losing the river remains substantial for people involved in the years-long attempts to protect the Stanislaus from a decades-old plan to raise New Melones Reservoir levels.

“But look at it and move forward,” Orman said. “Memories are as strong as the reality. That’s the foundation for the reality. Now we need to convert memories to action.”

Orman recounted how he drove across the new Parrotts Ferry Bridge, over New Melones and the flooded Stanislaus River Canyon, right before the gathering he helped host Wednesday night. He’d helped put together before-and-after photos that showed some of the pristine places that are now under water. He said that was painful enough, looking at photos of the live river and the dead river, but he still can’t bring himself to look at the reservoir itself.

“It was an hour before we came to Sonora,” Orman said. “It’s one thing to look at images of the denuded remnants of the river canyon. It’s another thing altogether to confront the reality. I don’t want to go there.”

People with Friends of the River and the Sierra Club got together Wednesday night primarily to give Orman and fellow activist Mark Dubois an opportunity to introduce the website [www.stanislausriver.org](http://www.stanislausriver.org).

Dubois, who chained himself to a boulder in May 1979 to try to stop the Army Corps of Engineers from filling New Melones Reservoir, said he’s still learning 40 years later how to take “pain and tears and alchemize what we learned back then and give it to future generations.”



Stanislaus activist Mark Dubois speaks Wednesday night at a gathering at Tuolumne County Library in Sonora. (Guy McCarthy / Union Democrat)

Orman coordinated news media river trips during the Prop. 17 campaign 45 years ago, chaired Friends of the River several years, led Greenbelt Alliance for 20 years, then worked as executive director of GreenInfo Network, where he is still a senior fellow, from 1996 to 2015.

He and others have put in hundreds of hours on the new website, and he says they are still in a soft-launch mode, working out quirks and technical issues.

The photos and maps and videos and other materials on the website are collectively called the Stanislaus River Archive, and they include many digitized elements of the Stanislaus River Museum collection maintained for decades by Martin Blake of Columbia.

Blake brought photographs, maps, and 40-year-old front pages of The Union Democrat from his collection to the gathering Wednesday night. Some of the maps were hand-drawn. One of the map pamphlets that showed former rafting sections was put



together by the federal Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Department of the Interior to tout recreation on the Stanislaus River.



Rafters revel on an OARS raft loaded for an overnight trip at the bottom of Bailey Falls in high water on the Stanislaus River in 1974. Stanislaus River Archive / [www.stanislausriver.org](http://www.stanislausriver.org)

“So what now, moving forward?” Orman asked people in the audience.

“What about activism?” came one of the first responses.

“Show the photos,” a man called out. “It made me cry twice. The music is a little over the top. But kids will see this and say ‘Wow we don’t want this to happen again.’ The before-and-after pictures.”

“Show the passion of the people in ‘78,” another person said.

“Friends of the River had 35,000 members, the most in the nation,” Dubois said. “Now most of my friends don’t even want to talk about it.”

A younger man, one of the youngest people in attendance, asked for more context, a timeline, facts and figures, to place individual elements on [www.stanislausriver.org](http://www.stanislausriver.org) in a more definitive perspective.

“I see the photos of Gov. Brown and Prop 17,” he said. “What do Brown and Prop 17 have to do with it?”



Larry Orman Rafters enjoy the jumping pool on Rose Creek, a tributary to the Stanislaus River on the Tuolumne County side, in August 1976.  
Stanislaus River Archive / [www.stanislausriver.org](http://www.stanislausriver.org) ?

Bob Stanley, a U.S. Forest Service river ranger who advocates for improved access on raftable sections of the Tuolumne River, suggested veterans of the Stanislaus campaigns 40 years ago have a lot of experience to bring to current issues on the Tuolumne, including Turlock Irrigation District and Modesto Irrigation District efforts to relicense Don Pedro downstream from Wards Ferry Bridge.

Turlock and Modesto irrigation districts are in the multi-year process of relicensing Don Pedro with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

Web site managers for [www.stanislausriver.org](http://www.stanislausriver.org) say it's being developed "to make clear the importance of the river and the campaigns to save it during the 1970s and 1980s, and to allow anyone to see visual evidence of what the river was, what the campaigns involved, and what it has become."

The project builds on volunteer efforts by Roy Tennant, who developed the first generation of the Stanislaus River Archive, and Blake, who maintains the Stanislaus River collection.

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