

VOLUME 5

WILD HOPE

FIELD NOTES AND IMAGES FROM NATURE'S FRONT LINES



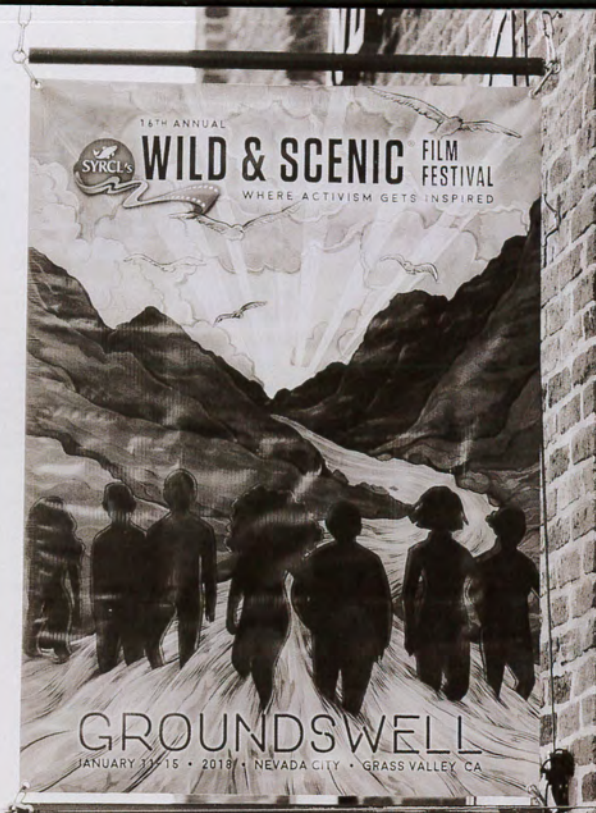
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THE LENS THAT CONNECTS US



The mission of the Wild and Scenic Film Festival is "to transform filmgoers into activists dedicated to saving our threatened planet." Opposite: Festival participants Jan Kirkpatrick (left) and Nicole Raglin (right).

Not just a showcase for films that can make a difference in the world, the Wild and Scenic Film Festival is the cornerstone of a community's efforts to protect a river and reinvent itself.



BY TESSA BUCHIN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY AUSTIN FTACNIK

MID-JANUARY in the Sierra Foot-hills of California the neighboring cities of Grass Valley and Nevada City are abuzz with anticipation as they herald the 16th annual Wild and Scenic Film Festival (WSFF) and the coming groundswell. Organized by the South Yuba River Citizens League (SYRCL), the festival mobilizes 7,500 filmgoers and community members to come together to honor the South Yuba River — the lifeblood of the region — and to rally support for protecting wildlife and wildlands globally.

SYRCL, pronounced, “circle,” began as a grassroots movement and is now the largest single-river watershed advocacy group in the United States. In the early 1980s, a rash of hydropower proposals sprung up all over the West. The 39-mile stretch of the South Yuba, a tributary of the Yuba River, was targeted for seizure via eminent domain when two

SYRCL Executive Director Melinda Booth is the inspiring force behind the Wild and Scenic Film Festival.

hydropower dams were licensed for construction on public land. Concerned river lovers gathered in the living room of Founding President Roger Hicks, MD, to hatch a plan to stop the dams. They knew that if the South Yuba was occluded the biotic diversity, the sacred grounds of the original people, and every curve, crevice and rock in the river — so intricately placed by nature — would be lost forever. “SYRCL became the lens that focused the love of the community for the river. It drew people to action,” Hicks says.

In 1983 SYRCL launched a 16-year-long fight to gain permanent protection for the river, and in 1999 the South Yuba received its wild and scenic designation under the California Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The act ensures that “selected rivers of outstanding, remarkable value shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.”

This year’s film festival commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Founded in 2003 to help fund SYRCL’s initiatives, WSFF metamorphoses the community into a multimedia landscape comprising environmental films, yoga classes, drum circles, coffee talks, fireside chats and youth activism workshops. After an immersive five days, the festival will hit the road with 176 film screenings at universities, non-profits and environmental organizations in 47 states and four countries.

Making Connections

“THE RIPPLE EFFECT, that’s what we are focused on...what we are doing in our little corner in the world to help in other little corners of the world,” explains Melinda Booth, Festival Director and SYRCL Executive Director. Booth is a community pollinator; her yearlong festival preparations include galvanizing a force of 700 volunteers. This year’s theme, “groundswell,” is just what’s needed. “Speaking the truth, demanding action, rising up in numbers...the groundswell is happening,” she says.

Booth’s optimistic leadership style grew out of her involvement in rewilding bears, reestablishing condors, reintroducing the Mexican gray wolf in Arizona, and reversing negative anthropogenic impacts. Of her work with SYRCL she says, “[I] hear the rushing of the Yuba River water and the wind as it blows up the canyon. Before you feel it on your face you hear it coming. The connection that I have to the Yuba River is deep. It’s the river, but it’s also the land itself, the open space, and the quiet. It’s rejuvenating for me every day. Those connections are a big part of what allows me to do the work



Project Coyote Founder and Executive Director, Camilla Fox, directed and produced *Killing Games*, *Wildlife in the Crosshairs*.

that I do. I wish that for everyone — to have a connection with a place.”

Booth carries these connections with her. Recalling childhood memories of roaming the woodlands of Texas and her fascination with the herpetofauna that inhabited the creeks, she says, “Amphibians are an indicator species of the health of an ecosystem” — and well deserving of the limelight. One of Booth’s favorites among this year’s 135 selected films is *Nobody Loves Me*, a short about a frog with an uncommon story.

In the coziness of the United Methodist Church in downtown Nevada City, we watch as *Nobody Loves Me* unveils the mysteries of *Telmatobius coleus*, reputed to be world’s largest aquatic frog, which lives in Lake Titicaca in the Andean highlands of South America. This critically endangered species, affectionately known as the “scrotum” frog, has an overabundance of skin, an adaptation to the oxygen demands of living at high altitude. Through the point-of-view of the camera, we follow a frog as it

swims through the sun-dappled water and settles at the bottom of the lake, a meditative expression on its face. We see too that the Uru people, who live on islands made of living reeds in the lake, are connected to the species. As they idle in their boats, the frogs cling to the hulls beneath them singing lullabies that reach us from across the equator.

Inspiring Compassion

IN THE BELLY OF NEVADA CITY City Hall, Camilla Fox, Founder and Executive Director of Project Coyote, co-leads a seminar, *Coyote America: A Natural and Supernatural History*, and announces the world premiere of the film, *Killing Games: Wildlife in the Crosshairs*, in which we meet the most maligned, controversial and iconic creature of the wildlands — the coyote. *Killing Games* pays tribute to native carnivores that are persecuted for blood sport in wildlife killing contests throughout the United States. In a pivotal scene, we are dropped into a natural landscape and watch as an adult coyote wavers between curiosity and nervous instinct. In the foreground, a feather dances in the bunch grass, and we anthropomorphize, intrigued and connected. The startling spray of a kill shot shatters the daydream. Commentary unreels, exposing the cruelties of wildlife killing contests. We are awake, in the know, and furious. The film concludes with the majestic song of a solitary coyote, joined by a chorus of more “song dogs” in an anthem to what’s wild and free.

Hands are raised. Where are these happening, someone in the audience demands to know. “I think the footage speaks for itself and evokes emotions without additional manipulations,” says Fox, thoughtfully, “I believe that we can ban wildlife killing contests in this lifetime. This film will help to serve that goal.” She has good reason to be optimistic. In 2014 Fox and Project Coyote successfully petitioned the California Fish and Game Commission to ban wildlife killing contests in the state.

Killing Games has been selected to tour with the Wild and Scenic film circuit this year. The film’s reach will help Project Coyote as it rolls out a national coalition to foster coexistence with predator species. Armed with a letter from their Science Advisory Board signed by 50 prominent scientists and credited by peer-reviewed sources, they aim to persuade state legislatures to enact protections. The letter rebuts claims that killing contests are necessary to reduce conflicts between predators and livestock. Fox has personally witnessed these contests — coyotes suffering in traps, their corpses hung on fence posts and stacked like cords of wood. “I saw these animals being vilified and



persecuted. I knew these animals needed an advocate, and I knew we had to put the science out there about why they matter and why they are important for the ecosystem. We provide solutions for how we can better coexist with native carnivores, both rural and urban.”

Fox refutes a prominent misconception — the notion that wildlife needs to be managed rather than allowed to self-regulate. As for receiving pushback from proponents of controlling populations of predator and nuisance species with lethal methods, she says, “It takes really listening to what their concerns are... when you can get to the root of their concerns, then you can start to address them.” Project Coyote works with the public and ranchers to come up with solutions for averting conflicts with wildlife in both urban and rural environments, such as fox lights, livestock guardian animals, fladry, reinforced fencing and night corrals for livestock. Inspired by the successes ranchers in Marin County, California, have had in reducing interactions between predators and livestock, Project Coyote has started work on another film, *Wild and Woolly*, that will be an intimate look into the lives of ecologically vital, native apex predators. “Each animal has an individual life story and each animal is a part of a family,” Fox reminds us.

Healing the Past

PROTECTING WHAT IS WILD asks us: What is our relationship to the land? This question lies at the heart of *Redefining Prosperity: The Gold Rushes of Nevada City*, a film by John de Graaf, who has produced 40 documentaries, including a dozen about the

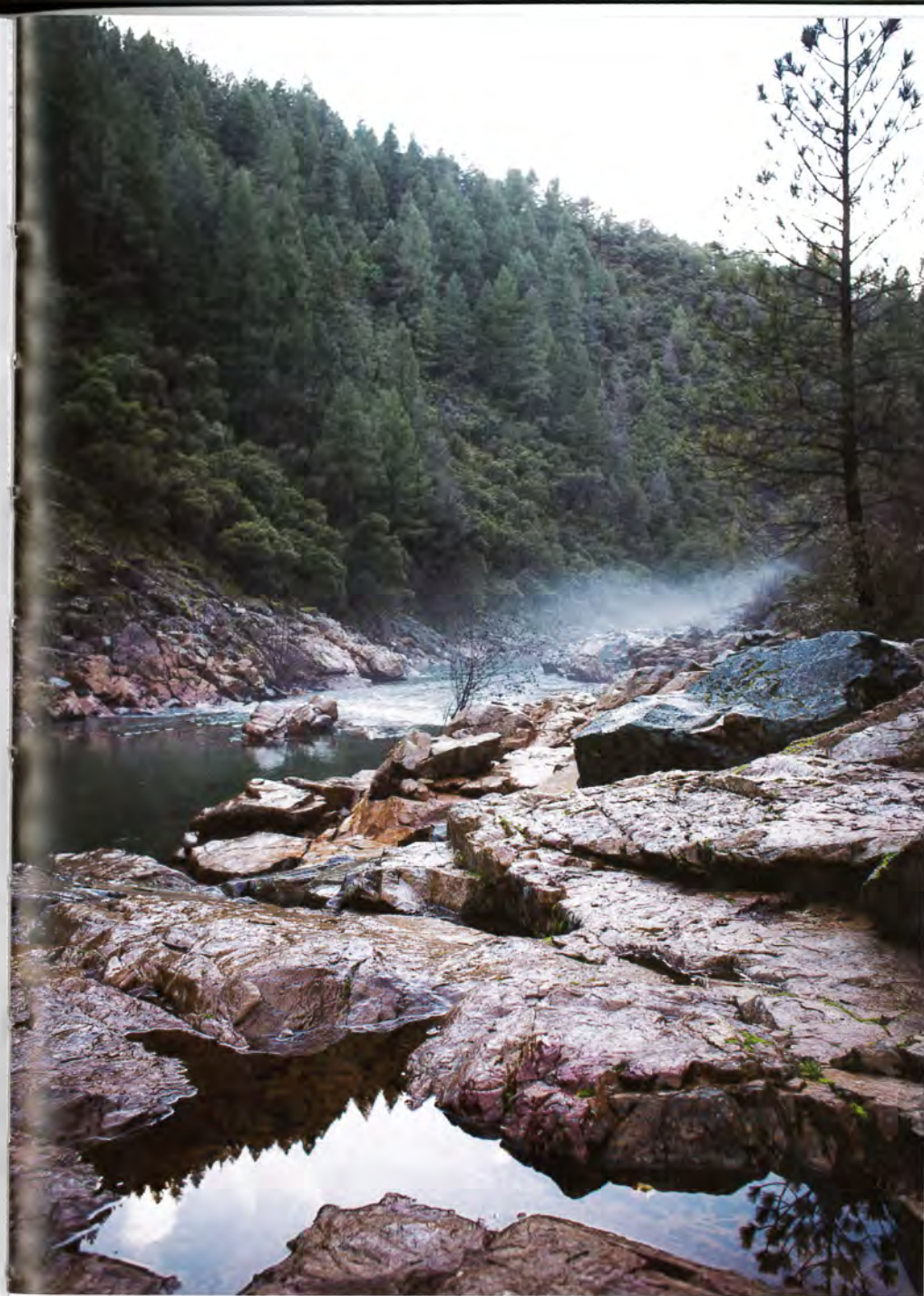
environment. Recipient of the WSFF’s People’s Choice Award, *Redefining Prosperity* digs deep into the story of Nevada City’s revival, a town that was born during the California Gold Rush. In 1848, people started pouring in from all over the world hoping to get rich from the

region’s extractive economy. The film surfaces decades of destruction of not only the environment but also the original people, the Nisenan Tribe of the Nevada City Rancheria.

The film’s opening scene places us on the sidewalks of Nevada City, a solitary fiddle accompanies the pleasant chatter of townspeople. The amiable introduction soon gives way to archival photos that reveal the scarred past of the town once known as “The Queen of the Northern Mines.” Startling images testify to the devastating, long-term impacts of hydraulic mining that washed tons of mercury- and arsenic-contaminated sediment into the Yuba River watershed.

Two-dozen community members are interviewed in the film, including Shelly Covert, a descendent of the original people. Covert describes the relationship her ancestors had with the Yuba River for thousands of years. Her great cousin, Elder Everett Smith, is quoted as saying: “There were as many salmon in the river as there were stars in the sky. Throughout the year run after run of salmon would ascend the river from the ocean. Unlike many rivers, there wasn’t a special season to celebrate the arrival of the salmon because they were always here. We celebrated instead the arrival of the acorns and the migrating herds of deer.” By the end of the Gold Rush, the salmon they depended upon no longer returned to the river. The original people, who once numbered 7,000, declined to just 18 individuals

During the WSFF, the community hosts drumming circles, public talks, an eco-fair, art exhibits and other activities to connect participants and inspire activism.



by the mid-1900s due to starvation, disease and persecution. But Covert’s people survived, and *Redefining Prosperity* reminds us that the earliest culture and history of Nevada City belong to the Nisenan Tribe of the Nevada City Rancheria.

Ranching and logging replaced mining when the gold ran out, and the surrounding forests were clear-cut, further destroying the landscape. The town took another blow in 1967 when a freeway was built through its business district, which permanently opened up a corridor between the Sierra Foothills and the fast-paced external world. But the ‘60s also brought a saving grace: the hippie diaspora and the back-to-the-land movement. *Redefining Prosperity* introduces us to an enlightened community of artists, musicians,

In addition to protecting and restoring their beloved South Yuba River, SYRCL is also organizing campaigns to bring back California’s wild chinook salmon to the upper Yuba River and to stop the building of a dam on the Bear River.

County like nothing else ever had, infusing the community with a spirit of reinvention that has led to a new “gold rush,” one that’s based on stewardship of the land rather than exploitation. “There’s nothing that we have done here that people can’t do in their own community. It’s just that people have a sense of place here,” Hicks says. **WH**

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The 17th Annual Wild and Scenic Film Festival, January 17-21, 2019, wildandscenicfilmfestival.org
 South Yuba River Citizens League, yubariver.org
 Project Coyote, Killing Games, projectcoyote.org
 Nobody Loves Me, mountainfilm.org
 Redefining Prosperity: The Gold Rushes of Nevada City, johndegraaf.com

philosophers, farmers and entrepreneurs who came to the area to escape the doldrums of conventional life. This warm breeze brought luminaries like Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, Gary Snyder, whose philosophy of bioregionalism and Buddhism-infused poetry invite us to embrace a new understanding of true wealth that comes from community and living simply. The legacy of these dreamers led to the sprouting of enduring projects such as KVMR radio, organic farms, food co-ops and collective art projects, but more importantly, it initiated a younger generation into a sustainable way of life.

The film then brings us back to the present, and we meet SYRCL’s Hicks rafting on the South Yuba River. In an emotional interview, he talks about his spiritual connection to the river: “I see water as the blood of life...and rivers as the blood vessels that carry that life. The South Yuba is the heart of our community.” We also meet civic leader Izzy Martin, a write-in candidate who won a seat on the Nevada County Planning Commission during the 1990s. During her time on the Commission, Martin and SYRCL led the fight to pass the California Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Redefining Prosperity sends a globally relevant message of hope by showing us how a community suffering from the ruination of the past was saved by the shared love of a river. The threat to dam the South Yuba River coalesced the citizens of Nevada