

## 736 Acres of Dredge Tailings Clutter the Parkway

Bikers, boaters and people who amble along the upper reaches of the Lower American River and around Lake Natoma pass by huge, randomly dumped piles of cobble stones and gravel. What they are seeing are the rock tailings from the largest gold dredging site in California.

Between 1900 and 1962, 17,000 acres were dredged in what is now parts of Rancho Cordova, Gold River, Fair Oaks and Folsom. Mammoth dredgers worked around the clock most days digging up gold-bearing gravels and cobbles sometimes to a depth of 100 feet – the equivalent of the height of a 10-story building. In the process, rich soils were buried below heaps of rock tailings.

The steam-powered dredges floated on a pond that they had created. A chain of buckets would scoop up the rocks and soil and dump it into sluice boxes where riffles separated the gold and allowed it to be captured by mercury. A conveyor belt then dumped the remaining rocks and gravel behind the dredge in uneven piles and furrows. In some

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Bald Eagles nesting at Lake Natoma. Photo by Kathy Kayner

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## SARA'S Annual Meeting Won't Be Held in December

BY STEPHEN GREEN

For decades, Save the American River Association's annual meeting has been held on the first Saturday in December. This year, we will have to cancel it because of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

We hope that we will be able to reschedule the meeting next spring or early summer and perhaps hold it with a picnic on the American River Parkway.

At the annual meeting, we discuss the major issues that we have been dealing with in the past year. Here is a summary of the issues.

***E.coli* BACTERIA** – For several years, a team of SARA members has been taking and testing water samples in the Lower American River. Dangerous levels of *E.coli* Bacteria have been found in several areas where people swim and fish, including Lake Natoma. The most dangerous levels have been found at Tiscornia Beach in Discovery Park.

Likely sources are sewage that homeless campers on the Parkway dump in the river. Another source could be leaks from the aging sewer lines that local agencies have placed near the river and its tributaries.

The state Central Valley Regional Water Quality Board is now also conducting tests in the river, but has yet to identify sources of the bacteria.

Sacramento County placed some signs along

the river asking people not to drink the water and to wash hands and shower when they return home. SARA has been urging county officials to install signs with more explicit warnings and to close Tiscornia Beach to swimmers.

**PROTECTING EAGLES** – The federal Bald & Golden Eagle Protection Act provides for criminal penalties for persons who “pursue, shoot, shoot at, poison, wound, kill, capture, trap collect, molest or disturb” eagles.

But a pair of nesting eagles with three chicks near Lake Natoma were constantly being harassed last spring by photographers who were too close to the nest. One man who was there frequently was observed yelling and swearing at other people. Another man tried to put a ladder on the tree under the nest. On two occasions, a helicopter for KCRA-Live Copter 3 flew within 200 feet of the nest.

The nest is on U.S. Bureau of Reclamation land. SARA was unable to get bureau officials or the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to patrol the area and protect the eagles. SARA's attorney then sent the two agencies a letter demanding that they enforce the law.

That got some patrols in the area and docents were asked to come back and talk

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## SARA Issues

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to people who were disturbing the eagles. The bureau is supposed to develop a plan this fall for protecting the eagles during the next nesting period.

**WATER TRANSFER FROM THE LOWER AMERICAN** – The Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) got a water right from the Lower American River when they were operating the Rancho Seco Nuclear Power Plant. The plant was closed in 1989, but SMUD kept the water right. Earlier this year, SMUD tried to sell 6,000 acre feet of water from the Folsom Reservoir to the City of Roseville for each of the next three years.

SARA members went before the SMUD Board of Directors and presented evidence that it essential to keep as much water as possible in the reservoir to protect the cold pool at the bottom of the reservoir. That water is released in the fall to lower water temperatures in Lower American where the fishery has been devastated by low flows and high-water temperatures.

SMUD officials ignored SARA's testimony.

SARA members then went to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and were able to stop the water transfer. They are now working with state officials in an attempt to revoke SMUD's unused water right.

**FISHERY IN THE LOWER AMERICAN** – The fishery in the Lower American River has been devastated by low water flows and high temperatures during critical spawning periods. Working with the Sacramento Water Forum, SARA members have been able to increase flows in the Lower American. But the flows still need to be increased to protect the fishery. And SARA members continue to pursue that goal.

**DEVELOPMENT PROPOSAL** – An out-of-town developer hopes to build million-dollar homes on 41 acres between Folsom Boulevard and the American River. The site overlooks

William B. Pond and River Bend Parks on the Parkway. The upper 21 acres on the property are suitable for home construction. But the lower 20 acres are in the river flood plain and have prime habitat for wildlife. An endangered Swainson's Hawk has been spotted in the area.

The land is within the City of Rancho Cordova. As this project goes through the development process, SARA will be working with nearby neighbors and other stakeholder groups to stop development of the lower 21 acres.

**NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN** – Sacramento County's Regional Parks Dept. is developing a Natural Resource Management Plan that defines criteria and standards to monitor, evaluate and protect the Parkway's resources from overuse, and provides steps to be taken to restore areas that have been overused. SARA is monitoring the process and providing input when appropriate.

**BANK PROTECTION** – The Bank Protection Working Group helps advise, plan, design and implement bank protection features on the Lower American River. They support federal, state and local efforts to provide the highest level of flood protection for the surrounding community and the conservation of natural resources along the Parkway. SARA has a representative in the Group.

**SUPERFUND CLEANUP** – For years, Aerojet Corp. dumped chemical waste on its property in Rancho Cordova. The waste contaminated groundwater which has spread under thousands of acres in Rancho Cordova, Fair Oaks and Carmichael. A federal Superfund cleanup is underway to remove the contaminated groundwater. SARA has a representative on the cleanup's Citizen Advisory Committee.

**BUSHY LAKE** – Sacramento State University has an academic program on habitat restoration that is conducting a major restoration project in the Bushy

Lake Area. SARA has two representatives on the project's Stakeholder Advisory Committee.

**LAKE NATOMA SHORELINE** – For several years, the City of Folsom has been developing plans to allow hotels, restaurants and other business to be built on the Lake Natoma Shoreline. SARA is monitoring the effort and will not allow it to occur.

**LEGISLATION** – SARA representatives work with a coalition of environmental groups that works on bills in the California Legislature. In every legislative session, there are bills to gut the California Environmental Quality Act and the coalition gets them killed. Among the bills we supported in the last session was one that bans highly toxic rat poisons which are a threat to wildlife. Several years ago, a SARA representative helped write the bill that banned throwaway plastic bags.

**CONSERVANCY** – SARA representatives help write the legislation that established the Lower American River Conservancy Program which administers grants for projects and restoration efforts on the Parkway. SARA President Stephen Green is the state Senate's appointee to the Conservancy Advisory Committee.

**PG&E MITIGATION** – The state Dept. of Fish & Wildlife has ordered PG&E to conduct habitat restoration projects in the Parkway to compensate for the clear-cutting that the utility did in the lower end of the Parkway last year. PG&E has chosen three sites totaling 11 acres. One south of Sunrise Blvd. and two more west of El Manto Dr. SARA is involved in the development of plans for the mitigations.

Those are just some of the major issues SARA is involved with. New issues always seem to be cropping up. For some of our volunteers, working with SARA is like having a full-time job. ■



## Dredge Tailings

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areas, the tailings were piled 35-to-40 feet high.

By 1962 when the dredging operations were no longer economically viable, more than one billion cubic yards of rock and soil had been dredged in the area. More than \$125 million in gold had been recovered. In today's market, the value of the gold would be near \$1.5 billion.

Over time, however, development occurred in parts of the area. Beginning in 1951, Aerojet-General Corp. acquired 11,500 acres for the development and testing of its missiles and rockets, and severely polluting the groundwater with chemical waste. Homes and commercial buildings are now erected on land that has been leveled and covered with imported topsoil.

Today, the American River Parkway is cluttered with 736 acres of tailings where scattered trees and bushes have managed to take root. The Folsom Lake State Recreation Area has 827 acres of tailings and there are another 300 acres in the Prairie City Off-Highway Vehicle Park.

"I have been riding my e-bike around Lake Natoma almost every day," said former Sacramento County Supervisor Jim Streng. "I find the piles of rocks left from the dredging years ago unattractive and not natural. I wonder if others are interested in suggesting to State Parks that they consider selling the rocks to a local aggregate company and restoring the area to a natural-looking landscape. Should there be folks that want to keep a few piles of rocks for historical reasons, that would be easy also."

In June, Streng exchanged e-mails on the subject with Richard Preston-LeMay, Folsom Sector Superintendent of the state Gold Fields District.

Preston-LeMay responded that State Parks and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (which leases the land to State Parks) have not planned projects at this time that would involve the large mining landscapes. But "we will take into consideration your suggestion," Preston-LeMay said.

The idea of restoring the native landscape on Lake Natoma could gain new traction after Gov. Gavin Newsom signed an Executive Order on Oct. 7. The order requires state agencies to develop strategies and projects to conserve 30 percent of state land and coastal water by no later than 2030. The agencies are to

focus on healthy soil management, wetlands restoration, active forest management and boosting green infrastructure. That would increase the storage of carbon in California's natural and working lands while removing it from the atmosphere. And that would have a significant impact in slowing climate change.

The order directed state agencies to create a new agency called the California Biodiversity Collaborative. The collaborative would reach out to government partners, Native American tribes, business and community experts and leaders, and stakeholder organizations to help develop strategies and projects.

Save the American River Association plans to be actively involved with the collaborative. ■



Dredger tailings piled next to the bike path near Lake Natoma

## James Campbell Jones

1941-2020

**W**e lost one of the American River's most productive river warriors when Jim Jones passed away on Aug. 9.

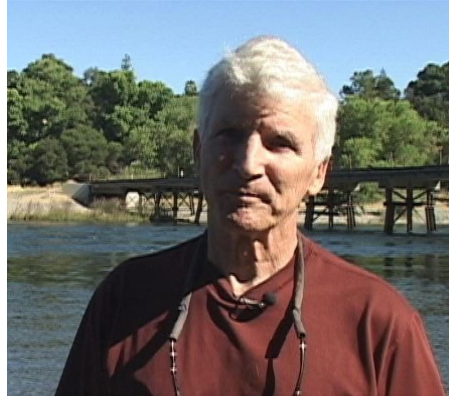
Jim spent countless hours working to restore, enhance and expand the American River Parkway, and protect the aquatic life in the river.

Working on behalf of Save the American River Association and the American River Parkway Foundation (which he co-founded), Jim spearheaded the passage of two bond issues that provided funds for projects on the Parkway and acquiring more land.

The Sacramento County Board of Supervisors recognized Jim's contributions when they named the footbridge crossing the river below Sunrise Blvd. in his honor: the Jim Jones Pedestrian Bridge.

Jim was an avid fisherman, biker and outdoorsman in addition to being a travel writer and photographer. Jim spent 40 years as a rocket scientist and engineer at the Aerojet Corp. and continued to do consulting work there after he retired.

Jim was born in Detroit, Michigan. He earned a B.S. degree in



Jim Jones near the bridge named in his honor. Photo by George Nyberg

Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois, and an M.S. degree in Mechanical Engineering from the University of California, Davis.

Jim battled severe illnesses in his later years. About 18 months ago, he left his home in Fair Oaks and moved to Hood River, Oregon, to be closer to family. He is survived by a son, two daughters, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

When the coronavirus pandemic quiets down, his family plans a service in his memory on Jim's Bridge.

He was a true adventurer and river warrior, and his spirit will continue to flow and support us all. ■

*Jim spent countless hours working to restore, enhance and expand the American River Parkway, and protect the aquatic life in the river.*

## Support County Parks — Buy An Annual Pass

The Pass pays for itself in 10 visits and all funds go directly towards maintaining and operating the 15,000-acre system. For as little as \$50 per year, you can have unlimited access and parking in the parks.

Pass holders receive free daily entry into Regional Parks and annual passes are valid for one year from date of purchase.

### Pass Fees Are Based On Use:

Vehicle:	\$50
Vehicle + Trailer or oversized vehicle (over 22 feet):	\$100
Vehicle + Horse trailer:	\$75
Vehicle and small watercraft:	\$80
Parks supporter pass*	\$50

*\* This pass is for those who want to support Parks but do not drive to Parks facilities*

### Where to Purchase Your Parks Pass

- Online through the American River Parkway Foundation Web site [arpf.org/visit](http://arpf.org/visit)
- At REI stores in Sacramento, Roseville and Folsom
- Patriot Cycles in Fair Oaks
- Effie Yeaw Nature Center at Ancil Hoffman Park
- Regional Park offices and park kiosks
- American River Parkway Foundation office at the William B. Pond Recreation Area ■



## SARA Membership Donations *July — September 2020*

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SARA appreciates the support of our generous members. Without your support, SARA would not be able to continue our role as *Guardians of the American River and Parkway since 1961*. New and renewing members are listed in *RiverWatch* according to their preference (indicated on the SARA membership/renewal form).

## In Memoriam

Save the American River Association has received donations honoring the memory of the following friends:

### PHILIP CRIMMINS

### JIM JONES

Save the American River Association frequently receives donations in memory of lost loved ones, many of whom were users and supporters of the American River Parkway. Some donors give names. Others prefer to remain anonymous. SARA notifies family members when donations are made.

The money is used to further SARA's advocacy work on behalf of the Parkway. Contributions may be made by check or online via SARA's website.

**SARA also has a Legacy program. For information on the program, please contact the SARA office at [info@sarariverwatch.org](mailto:info@sarariverwatch.org) or (916) 936-4555. ■**



Great Horned Owlets at River Bend Regional Park. Photo by Kathy Kayner

## Foothill Yellow-legged Frogs Get New Protections

The California Fish and Game Commission has voted to give new protections to the Foothill Yellow-legged Frog (*Rana boylei*).

Five of the six “clades” of the species are now classified as endangered or threatened under the California Endangered Species Act. Clades are biological groupings of a species that share a common ancestor.

The frog ranges from the ocean to the Cascade and Sierra Nevada Mountains, sometimes up to an elevation near 6,370 feet. They also are found the mountains in Los Angeles County.

But the species has been in serious decline in recent decades. Researchers site the causes as river and stream regulation and diversions, habitat alteration, aerial drift of pesticides, invasive species and snakes.

The yellow-leggeds are small – often growing to no more than 3.72 inches in length. The back of the frog tends to have grey, brown and reddish coloration. Adults have yellow coloration under their legs which may extend to their abdomens. Their snouts are triangular and buff-colored.

Adults often bask on exposed rocks in or near streams. When disturbed, they dive into the water and take refuge under submerged rocks or sediments. During cold weather, the frogs are mostly inactive and seek cover under rocks in streams or on shore within a few feet of water.

They tend to breed in water from mid-March to May depending on local water conditions. Females deposit eggs in clusters of 200 to 300 in gravel or rocks in moving water near stream margins. Eggs hatch in about five days and tadpoles molt into frogs in three-to-four months. Their normal home range is only up to about 33 feet. But they can move farther when water is high. Insects seem to be the favorite food of adults, but they also have been seen feeding on snails and pieces of molted skin. Tadpoles graze on algae and diatoms along rocky stream beds. ■

*The species has been in serious decline in recent decades. Researchers site the causes as river and stream regulation and diversions, habitat alteration, aerial drift of pesticides, invasive species and snakes.*



Foothill Yellow-legged frog (*Rana boylei*)

## Highly Toxic Rodenticides Have Been Banned in CA

Legislation banning the use of Second Generation Anticoagulant Rodenticides was signed into law in October.

Environmental and wildlife organizations have been battling for years to get these highly toxic rodenticides banned. Wildlife that feed on dead rodents ingest the chemicals. The rodenticides have been found in more than 70 percent of all the animals tested.

The bill, AB 1788, was sponsored by Assembly Member Richard Bloom, D-Santa Monica, and had the support of a coalition of organizations including Save the American River Association. There was strong opposition from pest control manufacturers and operators.

The rodenticides can still be used in some places where strong pest control is needed, including medical research facilities, agricultural warehouses and food production sites. ■



## Fire Danger is Worst in Logged Forests

More than 200 climate, fire and forest scientists recently signed a letter to members of Congress warning that logging forests increases wildfire intensity and spread.

The letter was sent in response to legislation that would increase logging in the national forests, especially in back country areas. Senators Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Steve Daines, R-Mont., have introduced legislation that would weaken environmental laws that limit commercial logging in national forests. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., is sponsoring legislation that would triple funding to subsidize logging in federal forest.

The senators argue that better forest management will decrease the forest

fire danger in western states where fires have been raging again this year.

The scientists, however, contend that weather and climate influence fire behavior much more than other factors. In forests where trees had been removed by logging, fires burn hotter and faster. Removing trees reduces shade, creates hotter, drier and windier conditions, and causes highly combustible invasive grasses to spread. Fires do not tend to burn more intensely in dense forests, or in forests with high numbers of dead trees.

The best way to protect homes and lives from wildfires, the scientists said, is to direct more resources toward creating fire-safe communities. In addition, warning systems must be

improved and adequate evacuation assistance must be provided.

“The climate crisis is going to loom larger every year, threatening more lives and communities,” said Chad T. Hanson, a research ecologist for the John Muir Project. “This is no time to be misled by the self-serving claims of timber companies or the politicians and scientists whose funding is tied to them. Our priority should be public safety, not profits for the logging industry.”

Hanson and Dominick A. DellaSala co-authored a book based on studies of wildfires titled “*The Ecological Importance of Mixed-Severity Fires: Nature’s Phoenix*.”



*Removing trees reduces shade, creates hotter, drier and windier conditions, and causes highly combustible invasive grasses to spread.*



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## Membership and Contributions

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*Insert credit card info below or go to our secure Web site to donate — [www.sarariverwatch.org](http://www.sarariverwatch.org).*

**The following membership categories are suggested:** *(Please circle your choice)*

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\$50 +	Supporting	\$100 +	Family
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