

Northern California Journal/Paul McHugh

THE WILD AND THE DAMMED

New West
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“... Dave Wellock has some pithy comments about the so-far ineffectual gestures at mitigating damage to what once was the Trinity River . . .”

Originating at a point about 50 miles from the Oregon border, the Trinity River drains a basin of approximately 2,900 square miles in the northern part of California. Flowing from the 5,000-foot mountains of the Shasta-Trinity National Forest, this river winds its way through Trinity and Humboldt counties, where it formerly supplied a fertile habitat for salmon and steelhead until it joined with the Klamath River at a point 40 miles from the Pacific Ocean.

DAVE WELLOCK, a road foreman for Trinity County, drops me off with his pickup and watches as I run my kayak through the first rapid on the Trinity River. This first drop is formed by the weathered remnants of a concrete weir built to catch anadromous fish—salmon and steelhead—so they could be transported around the dams that were being constructed on this river and thus reach their ancestral spawning grounds. But they can't do that anymore.

When I had talked with Dave about

the history of this river, which flows past the ranch where he grew up, I got signs of a deep, emotional fatigue that is more frightening to me than anger. In study after study the Trinity has been documented as a dying river. Since 1964, 85 to 90 percent of its flow above Lewiston has been cut off by two dams, diverted through the mountains to the east and added to Central Valley Project flows heading south to the Sacramento River.

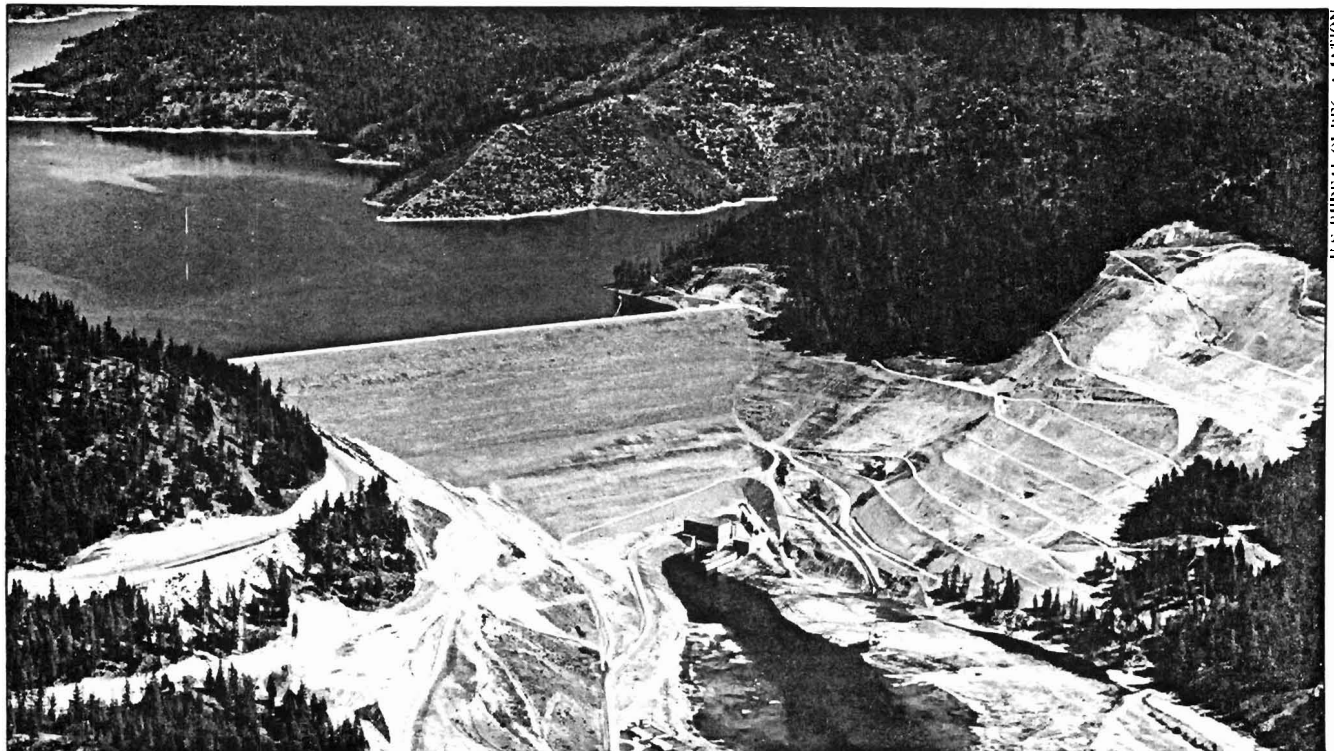
Dave Wellock has watched it go. He and his wife have a few pithy comments about their problems—as riparian landowners—with the state and federal agencies making seemingly endless studies on the river's decay and about the so-far ineffectual gestures at mitigating damage to what once was the Trinity River.

“The river is getting narrower and narrower, and as the moss grows it just chokes it,” Dave had said. “It makes me very depressed, especially when I look at what was promised and how it was supposed to benefit the county. Sure, we got some lake recreation, but I think we're

losing everything else we were supposed to get. We've wound up with a watershed devoted to Southern California. But they don't know the cost that made their gain. If these water development people could've only been around to see what the river used to be like and what a mess they've caused, maybe they'd have different ideas. Maybe not. But what can we as small taxpayers do? We're fighting ourselves with our own money.”

DAVE WAVES from shore, gets in his truck, drives off. I paddle on into the main stem of the Trinity, taking a look at the first stretch between Lewiston Dam and Grass Valley Creek. It's like entering a jungle. The banks are jammed with thickets of willow and alder, horsetails and rushes. In places, the river is bisected by new islands of this interwoven growth, forcing the remaining flow into narrow channels. And beneath the water, from bank to bank and for miles downstream, is an undulating shag carpet of moss, elodea and filamentous green

Forever dammed: The controversial Trinity Dam, which some people blame for reduced salmon runs and sediment buildup in the river



U.S. BUREAU OF RECREATION

algae—at times so thick that I can sink my seven-foot paddle into its clinging strands without touching bottom.

On a healthy river, such as the upper Eel, there are small clumps of willows and moss that thrive in summer and then are scoured by the high flows of winter and the torrents of spring. These seasonal pulses, dependent on the weather, are important to humans: When low we say there's a drought; when high, a flood. But within those parameters these pulses are vital to the health of a river. Not only do they cleanse it of excess riparian growth and organic debris, but they also create one of the many hidden flows upon which the life of the river depends. Beneath the river of water flows a river of stone, made of rock shards, the burden of landslide and erosion. These rocks are broken apart and rubbed smooth as they are gradually driven down the river canyon, becoming the riffles of clean gravel in which the salmon and steelhead spawn. Eventually this material becomes the sand of ocean beaches. Upside down (this is an easy posture to achieve in a kayak) on rivers such as the Eel, one can actually hear the swish, click and muffled boom of this flow of rock. Upside down on the Trinity one can hear only silence. It is a silence with consequences.

It means that the rocks and gravel in the Trinity are not being cleansed and moved but are slowly being sedimented in place. Upstream, it means the flow of eroded material is filling in behind the dams instead of moving downriver. Dams have a limited capacity to absorb this, called "dead storage"; when it is full it's the beginning of the end of a dam's economic life. Trinity Dam's designed economic life was reckoned to be 100 years, though many of its functions, with proper maintenance and an absence of seismic problems, could last for centuries. But eventually the lake behind the dam will become a vast marsh with the accumulation of sludge scores of feet deep. As far as I can determine, no one has—yet—entertained serious thoughts of dredging. Costs would be astronomical, and no prudent proposals exist for the disposal of a few million cubic yards of muck.

F.G. "Phil" Macias, who heads the contingent from the federal Water and Power Resource Service that is currently trying, with other agencies, to hammer out a policy for managing the problems of the Trinity, told me that "in view of increasing pressure against building additional reservoirs and the likelihood of increasing population, the need for more food and fiber and increased industrial needs, at some point in the future—for the Trinity probably 2,500 years—it may be necessary to go back in and dredge out accumulated sediment in some existing reservoirs. That would be a very expensive proposition, and it would have environmental impacts of its own." But if

this is not done, the reservoir will become a marsh bequeathed to the future rather than a healthy watershed or a functioning reservoir.

PADDLING ON down the main stem I slide over a riverwide hump of mossy stone, spin around and catch the long, straight reversal at the bottom. The wave is too perfect; surfing on it is almost as exciting as sliding the carriage back and forth on a typewriter. This rapid is machinelike for a good reason: It's man-made. The bottom edge is a row of rocks wrapped in wire. This is one of fourteen artificial spawning riffles constructed as part of the Interim Action Program of the Trinity River Basin Fish and Wildlife Task Force, which is trying to mitigate some of the damage to the stream stemming from effects of the dams.

As manager of the lead agency in the task force, Phil Macias's job is to hold the interests together, and he observed, "It's had its frustrating moments. There's a lot of conflicting interests involved."

According to one version, the stimulus that brought the group effort together was this: In 1972 teacher Roger Hardison was giving a class in conservation and natural resources at Trinity High. "I had a very active class that was really interested in doing something about the river. They'd reached the point where they were going out and doing their own investigations."

This research actually made it possible for the students to issue advance warning of an emergency water spill from the dam that the then Bureau of Reclamation had been unable to predict. (The bureau, an agency of the federal Department of Interior, changed its name to Water and Power Resource Service in 1979, producing the acronym WPRS, affectionately pronounced "whoppers.") "In February of 1974," Hardison related, "the bureau sent some guys up here to talk to the kids. When they got through the kids looked at me and said, 'We just got a royal bunch of baloney from these guys. They think we're dummies.' Any questions the students brought up—like 'What are you guys going to do about the damage to the river now?'—they just talked around it."

So the students took matters into their own hands. On February 22, two bus loads of students went down to private land near Highway 299, and while the school band played a dirge amid falling snow, they erected a large sign: ENTERING THE HOME OF THE TRINITY RIVER. STUDIED TO DEATH. RUINED THROUGH NEGLECT AND MISMANAGEMENT BY THE BUREAU OF RECLAMATION.

Beneath the sign, before a television crew from Redding and assorted news reporters, a steelhead found floating belly up in the river was buried in a tiny coffin.



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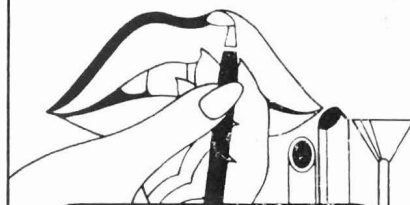
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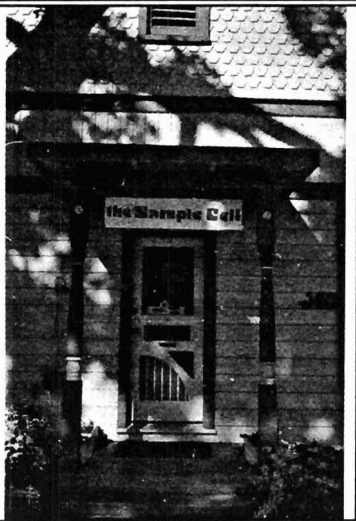
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It was an imaginative coup that made national media. "I kept getting squibs from all over the country," Hardison said. "Well, the bureau just went absolutely wild. That's when I learned that they cannot handle adverse publicity. Shortly after that our congressman, Harold 'Bizz' Johnson, got a hold of these guys and said, 'Hey, I'm getting a black eye from the black eye you guys are getting. I've been voting for your water projects—now, by God, expand the task force!' So the task force went from four members to thirteen state, local and federal members just like that. And all because of the pressure those kids were putting on."

An eight-year, \$7.6 million appropriation was voted by Congress and funneled through the Bureau of Reclamation to the task force. So far the lion's share of the money has been spent on administrative costs and further studies.

Ed Miller, a fisheries biologist for the California Department of Fish and Game (F&G), said, "We live in a strange kind of situation where the study has assumed more importance than the resource."

With its portion of the funds, however, the interim action group did manage to dredge several of the silted holes on the river and build fourteen artificial spawning riffles.

IT IS ON ONE of these that I am riding, and as the nose of my River Chaser roots back and forth in the sliding water like the nose of a questing hound I think back to the previous day, standing with Ed Miller by the first riffle in the series, the one right by Lewiston hatchery. Ed is large, middle age, with the freckled arms and pink flayed cheeks of a fair-skinned man who has spent most of his life outdoors.

Behind him, over his shoulder, rose the bulk of Lewiston Dam, 91 feet of earth fill and concrete raceway. But Lewiston just forms a forebay for the big one. A few miles upstream squats Trinity Dam, a 30-million-cubic-yard plug of earth and rock that rises 538 feet above its foundation and impounds a lake of more than 2.4 million acre-feet. The Trinity Project also includes two transmountain tunnels, Whiskeytown Dam and Whiskeytown Lake (which catches the water en route to the Sacramento River), four hydroelectric plants with a combined generating capacity of about 397,000 kilowatts and Trinity River Salmon and Steelhead Hatchery in Lewiston, owned and funded by WPRS, operated by F&G and built to try to mitigate fishery losses caused by the dams.

The last is a tall order. From predam salmon runs above Douglas City estimated in the 85,000 to 100,000 range, last year the returning fish numbered approximately 5,200, with 4,000 coming

back to the hatchery and only about 1,200 spawning instream.

When I spoke to Ed he was standing at the top of a giant slide of gravel imported to repair and modify the riffles. What the river once produced for free is now being replaced at a cost of about \$11 a cubic yard. This year about 14,000 cubic yards were bought, and \$175,000 is budgeted for the effort, one of the many unanticipated costs of the dam.

Ed has been working on the river for twelve years, trying to cope with the meteoric decline of its fishery. "This thing's out of the Dark Ages," he said, gesturing at the hatchery. "They do a helluva job in there, but it wasn't even state of the art when it was built. It's been carrying 95 percent of the reproduction load for the whole main stem, which it wasn't designed to do. It doesn't even mitigate successfully for upstream habitat losses, which it was designed to do. That's why you need people working in the river, to live with these fish. We cannot afford the luxury of more studies right now. We need to get out there and *do*. We need answers. And—this is my personal opinion, I'm not speaking for the department—but some of the people involved don't even know what questions to ask."

To me, Ed and hatchery manager Jerry Bedell seem courageously persistent in their struggle against looming odds to save the river fishery. The word they used most often to describe themselves, however, was "frustrated."

SHORTLY AFTER I paddle away from the last artificial riffle I pass a major contributor to their frustration—Grass Valley Creek watershed. The hatchery personnel are, in a phrase, shoveling fish against the sand.

Grass Valley Creek watershed is not composed of solid granite, like many other basins in the Trinity drainage, but of a type of granite that is much more erodible. Disturbed by logging and road building in the fifties and sixties, the watershed has dumped an annual 46,000 cubic yards of decomposed granitic sand into the Trinity system. In the days of the wild river, flushing this out would have been no problem; the river could move out an estimated 200,000 cubic yards of sediment a year. But back then the undammed river was also capable of creating huge roiling flows in excess of 60,000 cubic feet per second. For most of the seventeen years since the dam was built, the Trinity has been reduced to a consistent miserly trickle of between 150 and 200 cubic feet per second, except when WPRS needs to get rid of a little extra. The river's sediment-bearing capacity was accordingly reduced. It can now transport only 10,000 yards of sediment per year with predictable results: Rolling drifts of sand creep inexorably down the river

“... It's one thing to read or hear about the death of a river. It's quite another to see it...”

smothering spawning gravel, eliminating bottom-dwelling insects, filling in the deep holes that fish require for rest, escape and cooler temperatures.

“You go into a healthy stream,” Ed Miller told me, “and you pick up a rock. You turn it over, and it's squirming with life, like it's gonna attack you. You go to the Trinity, and you pry out a rock. You turn it over, and there's the other side of the rock.”

One of the disputed studies—if not the most disputed (the comments and criticisms of this study weigh nearly as much as the study does: nine pounds)—is a six-volume report issued in 1979 by Frederiksen, Kamine and Associates, Inc., of Sacramento. They were hired by WPRS, acting independently of the other members of the task force. The report tends to exonerate the dam builders for the sediment, citing the logging and road building as the sediment producers.

But it's interesting to note that after the Civil War the Trinity basin saw some of the world's most intensive placer mining and dredging. This is where the gold diggers came when they were kicked out of the Sierra foothills. La Grange placer mining shattered more than 100 million cubic yards of gravel from the face of Oregon Mountain in 50 years, using hydraulic nozzles called “giants.” And yet, for most of that time, according to several observers, the river had phenomenal runs of salmon. The wild river was able to maintain itself, to absorb even that impact and remain healthy. Now, dammed and diverted, it is so robbed of essential energy that it slumps in its canyon like a Sterno bum in an alley, unable even to cleanse itself.

It's one thing to read about the death of a river, to hear it described in conversations. It's quite another to see it. From Lewiston to Grass Valley Creek the bed of the Trinity is all moss, broken only by the glint of an occasional beer can. Below Grass Valley Creek it is all sand, shining and sterile—from bank to bank, miles of submarine desert. This normally is where young salmonids would feed and grow before they headed out to sea.

I paddle over Stott Hole, where the task force had some of the accumulated decomposed granite dredged out in the summer of 1979. They cleaned an area some 60 feet long to an average depth of 15 feet. It filled in again within a few months. I paddle on over Crosby Hole, where Bing Crosby caught his first steelhead, a strapping eight-and-a-half pounder, in the autumn of 1963, the year Trinity Dam was completed. Crosby Hole is now smothered with sand.

TAKE OUT at Steelbridge, dry off, change clothes and go down to Indian Creek Lodge in Douglas City, the sportsmen's resort where Bing taped up the fly he used to make his prize catch, recording the size and date on the big boards that hang in the laundry room. That was when John Brown owned the place. Lloyd Wallace has it now. He reminisces about the last of the good old days, even as he tries to adapt to the new ones.

“Sportfishing people are the finest quality individuals I've run into anywhere,” he says. “But the diehards aren't coming in like they used to. Four and five years ago I had people who'd leave L.A. on Thursday, drive all night to get here, then put on their boots and go right out to fish. In the first years I used to send out postcards announcing the steelhead and salmon runs. I haven't put a card out in three years. I won't survive if I have to rely on fishing. I'm hardly doing that now. I've already started the conversion to family entertainment.”

Lloyd is seeking a small business loan in the realm of \$150,000 to turn the lodge into what he calls a “resort resort,” with restaurant, lounge, tennis courts and shuffleboard, hot tub and swimming pool. But he won't be able to go to the Central Valley Project for any help with the loan. His loss is another of the hidden costs of the dam, and there is no provision for compensation, just as there are no provisions for compensating the Yurok and Hoopa tribes downstream or the commercial ocean salmon fishing fleet. While there is no doubt that increased fishing by these groups has contributed to the decline, a healthy resource would have been far more resilient while equitable fishing regulations were devised and enforced. As it is, the offshore commercial fishermen had six weeks gutted from their midsummer salmon season in a desperate measure to save the remnants of Klamath-Trinity stocks. This last event sent shock waves through the north coast economy, for if fishermen are unable to go out and catch Trinity fish during that period they are also unable to go out and catch any other kind of salmon. Zeke Grader of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations reckons the potential loss to the California north coast in the realm of \$40 million. Given the currently sluggish timber industry it is a loss that can be ill afforded.

My last stop is with Trinity County supervisor Jim Smith. After his days as a U.S. Air Force pilot and captain for international airlines, he returned home to enter local politics and fight tirelessly for restoration of the river he knew intimately through the years of his boyhood.

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“... ‘You could wade out and see salmon spawning all around you,’ recalls Jim Smith . . .”

He is one of Trinity County's representatives on the task force; at his fingertips are bits of information that illustrate things from the Trinity County point of view, such as how the height of Trinity Dam was increased and the amount of water diverted was doubled between the time the dam was proposed and the time it was executed. Although the county was promised 25 percent of the project's electrical output, the county has yet to receive a watt. More than 20,000 acres of prime timberland and farmland were inundated by the lakes, yet all the county receives as compensation is a small annual payment in lieu of tax revenue. One of Smith's favorite bits is a quote from Congressman Clair Engle, who helped sell the dam to the public in the early fifties: The project planners “do not contemplate diversion of one bucketful of water that is necessary in this watershed.”

But today I get information from him that not many are privy to—a vivid description of how it used to be. We are standing in a dry gulch of rounded stones, a site downstream from Smith's home, a former bed of the meandering wild river. With arms spread wide he tries to tell me what it was like when he came home from World War II. It seems a scene cut from the same fabric as Hemingway's *Big Two-Hearted River*. Every morning for 45 days during the height of the spawn he would go down to the water.

“From hundreds of yards away you could hear the fish, a bedlam of splashing, like kids in a swimming pool. The river was a series of big deep pools and long stretches of gravel with just enormous redds [beds] of salmon,” he remembers. “You could wade out into the middle and there would be salmon spawning everywhere around you. If you stood still you were like a tree or anything else; fish would drift into the eddy of your legs. There'd be a pack of steelhead kind of idling downstream of a redd. One would race in and lure the male off into an attack, then another would come sailing in and ram into the female, eggs would come spilling out, and the rest of the steelhead would gobble them up. How could there be reproduction with that much predation? Well, the reproduction was just that much heavier. But personnel in the agencies don't believe me when I describe this because they have no experience or frame of reference for it; it just doesn't make sense to them.”

The magic and mystery of the wild river's fecundity, extant now only in fading local newspaper accounts and memories of the older residents, will never be realized again in our lifetimes. But with increased water releases to the river and

careful habitat restoration work there is the possibility of “gardening” a river in the place where one ran before. This is the hope that keeps people like biologist Ed Miller going.

“I know we can save the river,” Ed says. “It's not going to be preproject—forget it, we just don't have the physical plant out there. In some places it's about as destroyed as it can get. Saving it is going to take a lot more habitat people, it's going to take a lot of money and commitment from a lot of agencies to get out there and do it. If they'd started years ago, it would've been a lot easier. Every year that goes by it becomes more expensive and more difficult.”

Any effort to restore the river and its fishery would not only have a high cost in dollars—about \$25 million initial cost and at least \$80,000 annual maintenance for the whole upper stretch, according to one estimate—but would also require that the agribusiness and municipal beneficiaries of the Central Valley Project give up some of their cheap water and power, that ocean fishermen, Indian in-stream netters and sportsmen give up some of their catch, that poaching be stopped, that local timber operators exercise greater care in road building and harvest . . . and perhaps most important of all, that the real cost of damming a wild river and destroying a healthy watershed be fully and finally acknowledged.

THERE ARE SIGNS of a change in the wind; the weathercocks of official attitude are beginning to turn from a policy of neglect interspersed with hand wringing to one of effective concern. On September 4 President Carter signed a bill authorizing the building of a small dam to catch and remove sediment from Grass Valley Creek and permitting more intensive dredging of sand from the main stem Trinity. And on April 18 Secretary of Interior Cecil Andrus, recognizing his long-standing “duty to establish appropriate releases into the Trinity that are sufficient to protect the fishery,” ordered that for an interim period of a year the official flows permitted to go down the river be more than doubled, from 120,500 acre-feet to 286,700 acre-feet. Under experimental conditions WPRS had temporarily increased flows to 245,000 acre-feet to observe results over a three-year period, but this study was discontinued during the drought. The recognition of the need for increased flow at the highest level of the Department of the Interior adds a certain compunction to what was an experiment.

“I think we're very pleased,” said Michael A. Catino, acting regional direc-

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tor of the WPRS, when I asked him about these changes. WPRS had long-standing reservations about both of them, desiring a different site for the Grass Valley sediment dam and describing additional water release without a comprehensive program as a "simplistic solution." But the agency is evidently willing to support the decisions now being made.

When I asked him why there were so many years of delay between Trinity Dam's construction and real efforts to mitigate its obvious downstream effects he said, "That's a helluva good question," and then there was a long pause. He cited confusion of studies, entanglements between agencies, the political clout of farm interests in the Central Valley, the responsibility of the WPRS to wring maximum benefits out of any project. Then he described a gradual shift in priorities at the service. "I think we're moving in the right direction. We have a higher degree of environmental awareness than we did twenty years ago."

But it may be too late. Even partial restoration of the Trinity River will not be cheap, and it will not be easy. Easing memories of the rape of the Trinity may be even more difficult. The Trinity story is one very cogent reason many Northern Californians are running scared of the Peripheral Canal and its implied threat of more dams and diversions from the few remaining living rivers of the north coast. Dam, reservoir and diversion proposals exist for many of them (including the Eel, the Smith, the Mad and the Van Duzen), frequently in multiple combinations. Personnel for the WPRS and the California Department of Water Resources say that the cost-effectiveness of most if not all of these projects is too low for them ever to be built and that the best sites in the state have already been utilized. While this may be true, it is also true—according to a story in the *Sacramento Bee*—that the Department of Water Resources "has not done any benefit-cost analysis of about \$4 billion worth of projects authorized in Senate Bill 200 [the Peripheral Canal bill]." In any case, the Trinity again raises an admonitory finger about such numbers games. Although House documents show that the Trinity Project was sold to Congress in the fifties as having a benefit-cost ratio of 3.31 to 1, an in-house report prepared for the Department of the Interior in 1973 revealed that the actual benefit-cost of the project had turned out to be much lower, in the realm of .22 to 1, or 22 cents of benefit realized for every \$1 of the project cost. This underlines the worst fear of the North, that similar projects may be built, regardless of environmental concerns or sound economics, as long as the most severe costs can be confined to the area where the water originates and the benefits made to accrue at the points where it arrives.

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