

**Attachment III: Some of the Politics, Social Change, and Organization of Local Environmental Action
By Ralph Mendershausen**

1. The Merced River Canyon constituency has grown greatly and may be enlarged by some local trends:

The political representation for El Portal/Foresta/Yosemite Valley on the County Board of Supervisors has been more strongly influenced by environmental concerns since Art Baggett replaced Beverly Barrick in 1986 as Supervisor for District 1. That was in the days of the Merced Canyon Committee when Beverly came out for the MID hydro project on the South Fork Merced. Patti Reilly supported a South Fork Wilderness. Lee Stetson's first election was due in part to his support for a South Fork Wilderness...

In the 1970's it was uncommon for the upper management of NPS to retire or build in the county. Today many middle and upper management live here, ie in Midpines, and increasingly, in Mariposa. Superintendent Binnewies (mid 1980's) actually lived in the greater Bootjack area. He was an exceptional Superintendent.

2. Environmental groups have tended to be home grown here. In the 70's Audubon was virtually the same as the Unitarians and any potential Sierra Club. We had no Sierra Club. The more (local) politically active environmental groups were, in order of appearance: "Keep Mariposa Rural" (opposed massive parcel/lot creation without thought to infrastructure) (1979-1980?); "Merced Canyon Committee"(prevent dams in the watershed)(1983-1987); "Downwinders" started by Barry Cunningham(1986)in Bear Valley worked against Golden Bell's heap leach gold mining plans above Bagby; "MERG" (Mariposans for the Environment and Responsible Government), which sought a broader scope than single issue environmentalism; "Upper Merced River Watershed Council", now a collective of stakeholder groups in the watershed seeking a permanent place in addressing river and canyon issues). The UMRWC is now a 501c3 but began under the auspices of the Resource Conservation District. They eventually split off to form their own non-profit 501c3 organization, allowing them to carry on previous river tending functions but adding in potential for advocacy. "Downwinders" merged into "MERG"; In 2017 "MERG" itself folded after some 15 years and active members joined forces with the "Upper Merced River Watershed Council".

Today Mariposa has a very active and large Audubon chapter, temporarily sidelined by COVID. Other groups: 'Merced River Conservation Committee" formed to work for expanded public benefits from Merced Irrigation District's 5 yr relicensing process for its Exchequer Dam. Since these licenses can be good for 40 years, the conditions in those licenses have long term meaning for the entire Merced River. This group worked closely with BLM and NGO's to put new recreational opportunities into MID's future. These efforts were resisted by MID, which initially denied there was even a trail along the N. Side of the Merced on their land. "Keep It Wild" is essentially a local branch of Friends of the River. FOR has shown interest in an ongoing grassroots presence in the watershed.

The tendency of our local environmental groups toward an *ad hoc* function has contributed to their demise. Some have become tax exempt to facilitate lobbying and fund raising, but that has not ensured their survival. Often because of where we live there is not enough energy or youth or numbers or sense of urgency to keep on going. We have had a tendency to reinvent the wheel as crises arise.

The sole candidate for a local canyon umbrella group today is the "Upper Merced River Watershed Council," which is a 501c 3 tax exempt group. The Council supports the MRT planning process, water quality monitoring, trail maintenance, and river cleanup. It is committed to protecting the Wild and Scenic rivers. Their website Merced-river.org is a good starting point for more information on Merced Irrigation District's spillway raise project. That project is dormant but alive. It would damage the status of the Merced and all other designated rivers. Should the UMRWC disband we shall probably have to invent a new one...Protecting the river canyon, like brushing clearance, is never "done".

3. We are at a time where our Merced and the South Fork rivers, our watershed, our canyons, our trails, and the critters who live there are all more linked together in our minds. This is a new, more holistic phase of conservation activity. Just caring about one river segment or one issue really makes no sense any more.
4. Mariposa County can be a constructive partner in the preservation of the outstanding values of the Merced River Canyon.

Due to federalism counties such as ours have been the natural recourse of those in conflict with federal or state authority and management. This may change some in resource issues but it is unlikely to disappear. In the past this has sometimes led to strained relationships between the county and public land management agencies that can be played upon/exaggerated by politicians.

Mariposa has often fostered closer relationships with MID. Its harsh treatment by MID, however, has been similar to a neglected step child's. Regions such as ours with high amounts of federally owned land have very long traditions of being very suspicious of federal agencies. Might our county foster a long term vision of resource protection and minimal development in the Merced River Canyon?

5. Some other ideas to think about and add to include:

Increasing social diversity of residents and park users.

Increasing use and availability of vacation rentals as Yosemite visitation has become dominated by day users overnighting outside of the Park.