



The Sacramento Bee

Viewpoints: Water in redwood country is worth more than nickel

By Tim Palmer

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Far up on our North Coast, the Smith River flows as an incomparable gem of California, breathtakingly beautiful as it courses crystalline through the heart of redwood country. The Smith is the state's only major river lacking both storage and smaller diversion dams. It's also our finest stronghold of Chinook salmon – vital to commercial fisheries at sea and also to a vibrant sportfishing industry. Because of unusual geology, the basin has some of the greatest diversity of plant life in the West.



Thomas B. Dunklin
Chinook salmon in the Smith River watershed. The river, a stronghold for Chinook, is vital to commercial fisheries and the sportfishing industry.

While the sparkling river, trophy fish and ancient forests were all gifts of nature, they don't remain intact by chance. A long history of stewardship by our state's leadership, local citizens and dedicated activists has seen that the refuge of the Smith remains available for all to see and appreciate. Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park and other groves were set aside by the foresight of the Save the Redwoods League. National Wild and Scenic River designation came at the request of Jerry Brown in his first round as governor. A National Recreation Area was designated in the 1980s. Multiple threats were warded off by tireless initiatives of the Smith River Alliance, California Trout and others.

All that farsighted work is now in jeopardy. While we've been investing tens of millions in protection measures for this one-of-a-kind corner of California, a multinational conglomerate based in London has applied for the rights, the water and the permits to explore the strip-mining of nickel, which accompanies the same bedrock that yields the rare but fragile plant life. The mine would be near Baldface Creek, just across the border in Oregon, on land beyond reach of the refuges created in California. Yet foul runoff would flow directly to the Smith's North Fork and main stem just upstream of Redwood National Park.

The corporate plans are predicated on privileges granted in the Mining Law of 1872. Based on rationale dating to the presidency of Ulysses Grant, mining companies can still claim public land for a nominal fee, and mine with impunity and scarce regard even for water-quality rules.



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This year, the national conservation group American Rivers named Baldface Creek among the 10 most endangered rivers in the nation. If permits from the Forest Service and other agencies are approved, a century of efforts to protect the Smith could fall victim to the price that China is willing to pay to a corporate giant in England.

All this can be avoided.

The Forest Service and Congress can withdraw the area from new mining claims, and our elected officials can pass legislation to permanently protect the Smith's water quality, fisheries and recreational resources. This would honor the decades-long work and investments of many Californians by safeguarding the watershed's extraordinary qualities and the long-term health of our North Coast economy – based on fish and recreation, and not the boom-and-bust of strip mining for export.

Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley have indicated support to protect the Smith headwaters. Members of the California delegation have taken positive action in the past on behalf of the Smith, and they should continue to lead the way toward keeping this gem of California just the way it is.

Tim Palmer is the author of "Rivers of California" and "Field Guide to California Rivers."

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