

Conference highlights importance of rivers

By Linda Fine Conaboy

OLYMPIC VALLEY – One of the popular terms heard during the River Network's River Rally was "citizen scientist."

In workshop titled Restoring and Connecting a Wild & Scenic River, presenter Carrie Banks from Massachusetts said that she uses citizen scientists to prioritize projects, secure funding, document crossing and stream function, among other jobs.

Bank's presentation was followed by another, Sierra Headwaters: Protecting and Restoring Rivers at the Source, where Rachel Hutchinson discussed the Yuba River watershed and Beth Christman from the Truckee River Watershed Council gave an informative overview of the Middle Martis Wetlands Restoration Project.

The task, to ameliorate the situation with the wetlands, started with a creek that was too small to handle the job, Christman said. The Middle Martis Creek channel was undersized for even moderate flow, there was lots of undercutting and meadow degradation, as well as highway flooding.

After bringing different entities together, they completed the job just before the advent of one of the largest water years ever recorded in the Sierra—the record-setting event of 2016-17. The restoration came through brilliantly, doing its job efficiently and with very little damage, much to their satisfaction.



Nicole Silk,
president of
conference host,
River Network.
Photo/Linda Fine
Conaboy

“Besides surviving that winter, we learned that a restored meadow is able to retain much more carbon, so the project is considered a huge success,” Christman said, referring to the fact that many meadows within the Sierra are highly degraded because of their carbon-rich soils, which allow a large amount of carbon dioxide to be disseminated into the atmosphere.

More than 500 people attended the April conference at the Resort at Squaw Creek in Olympic Valley. Each year the event is at a different locale, attracting water warriors from at least 40 states and representatives from Canada and Australia. The purpose is to connect local water champions, and empower organizations and individuals with the tools, training, and resources needed for success.

“Every year we move to a new location to connect with people whom you wouldn’t know or be able to learn from,” said Nicole Silk, president of conference host, River Network. “It’s the only conference of its kind where you can connect with people who are working at the local level on healthy rivers and clean water all over the country. The conference offers knowledge to fill your tool kit; it is inspiring and we do a lot of

celebrating. We step back and recognize river heroes—we don't do that enough. We connect people to save rivers."

She explained that this is the 19th anniversary of River Rally and that they decided Lake Tahoe and environs were the perfect environment in which to celebrate. "We knew we wanted to be on the West Coast, close to water and the snow is beautiful. Lake Tahoe is just down the road, and the water quality of the lake is extraordinary," she enthused.

As organization president, it is Silk's fondest hope that people come away inspired to do more for local waters and leave with more tools than they came with to get that job accomplished.

With 91 learning opportunities including six keynote speakers and plenaries, 74 workshops and 11 field trips over a three-day period, the atmosphere was definitely upbeat and inclusive. Workshops at the event included Defending the Waters of the United States; Partnering up for Conservation; Connecting People to Rivers; Water Infrastructure for a Sustainable Future, with more than 30 in all.

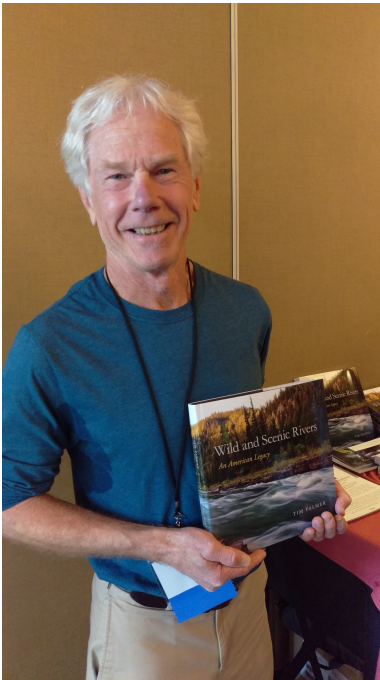
"We are the foremost national nonprofit connecting water-focused organizations, agencies, businesses and communities for greater local impact and healthier rivers across the U.S. We are the only national non-profit with this unique focus," Silk told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Kick off speaker was author, adventurer, photographer and river master Tim Palmer, who offered his audience an enlightening overview of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, which is a rivers system created by Congress to preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing, un-dammed condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

Palmer showed a film highlighting some of the beautiful, free-flowing rivers with scenery so stunning you definitely wanted

to book a trip on the Snake, the Klamath, the Rogue or any of the other unfettered wild rivers where Palmer is privileged to navigate his boats.

Now, there are more than 300 rivers across the U.S. possessing the Wild Rivers designation; in 1968, there were only 12.



Tim Palmer is an advocate of keeping rivers wild and scenic. Photo/Linda Fine Conaboy

Palmer explained that the 1950s is also known as the era of the big dams, with many being built during that period on numerous unsuspecting rivers—this was a state of affairs not to the liking of three-term congressman from Arizona, and secretary of the Interior from 1961-69, Stewart Udall. Udall enlisted the help of then-first lady Lady Bird Johnson, who was perhaps instrumental in convincing her husband to begin the protection of rivers.

The Wild and Scenic River Act became law with its nearly unanimous passage 50 years ago. It carried two stipulations,

Palmer said: 1) that the waterway be free-flowing and; 2) that it contain one or more outstanding qualities, such as unique geology.

Considering that within the United State, a water crisis looms that includes issues of security, affordability, quality and access—more than one-third of Americans are at risk of losing affordable drinking water and more than half of all of our rivers remain in poor health.

And, as Palmer said, “The advent of global warming makes it even more important to protect our rivers. That, and the push from the mining industry, which is battling to strip away designations so they can begin mining along wild rivers.”

According to Palmer, this makes it even more important to protect as many rivers as possible and provide them the protection of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Many rivers, he said, are now queuing up to receive the protected designation. The good news, he reiterated, is by vision and planning, the program has grown from just 12 to more than 300.

“We are all children of the Act,” Palmer said. “Rivers are lifelines; they connect us. They deserve protection.”