

The Language of the Lower American

By Stephanie Taylor, artist

“The World According to Garp,” the definitive novel of the 1970s, refers to the *undertoad*, a metaphor for what lies beneath the surface of things. The Lower American River, though controlled by humans since 1956, reveals a profound dichotomy between the beauty of its surface and hidden forces below. This is most evident from the river itself, not its banks. Beautiful, complicated, powerful and deadly, like the *undertoad*, understanding its forces isn’t comforting.

Thus, on an October morning perfect for canoeing, I embark on an effort to understand. I’ve asked an expert paddler to be my guide. In the shelter of Sailor Bar, the water is mirror smooth, as the canoe glides silently over weary salmon and cobbles worn smooth. From the bow where I perch with my camera and sketchpad, the main channel looks wide, daunting, fast and rough. Forcing myself to ignore innate fears, from the rear, the paddler looks ahead. He’s been reading the language of rivers for decades.

“A river is a living organism, with objectives, memory and behavior,” the paddler explains. It seeks to balance energy, volume and gradient with the kinds of sediments it carries, by regulating width and depth. I think about how this river used to flood, flowing with a mind of its own.

From the west side of the Sierra, three main channels of the American River feed 1,888 square miles of watershed into Folsom Lake. From the east the river responds to the Sierra, from the west it responds to the levels of the sea, and in between -- humans. Folsom Dam was built to manage the conflicting demands of a river that is a victim of the Gold Rush and massive mining operations that filled streams, buried flood plains and moved channels.

Pelicans watch us pass, white wings a contrast to dark blue water. The only sound is the paddle dipping in and out, waves gentle against the canoe. I know this river well, biking and jogging; for 26 years, I lived on the bluff above William Pond. I know those trails in the heat of summer fragrance, and the snap of winter chill.

We’re approaching ominous signs on the surface. Raised pillow shapes indicate vertical currents below, while eddies threaten the unwary. Haystacks of angry water indicate hard, shallow objects. The river slaps angrily against the canoe. The paddler looks for a funnel shape in the river and heads for the deepest part of the “V,” the safest passage.

The canoe glides past submerged boulders, cobblestones, trees and exposed roots. Around Sunrise Avenue, towering clay cliffs reveal thousands of years of geology. The river has carved strange mesa structures from clay so hard that it acts like bedrock. Clay defines the river as it cascades through the San Juan Rapids, creating haystacks, eddies, whirlpools and boils. Seeking a balance between erosion and deposits, it cuts into the cliffs on one side and places gravel on the other. In high volume, the river wants to cut a deeper channel, but the clay resists. When it can’t incise, the river widens. Up to the levees.

At William Pond, the river runs around and over tiny islands, spinning in and out of channels with water sparkling in the late afternoon sun. Hard, carved clay bottom and banks lay exposed. Just inches under the canoe, rocks are packed as tightly as paving. This spot has always been a favorite. I remember during a drought one year, levels were so low that the bottom of the river was exposed. I ran into a miner who told me that within holes, I could still find gold. I spent happy hours crouched down, and found two tiny flakes.

Near Howe Avenue, the paddler feels the resistance of the rising tide. The influence of the sea can often be felt upstream in its ebbs and flows. From the bow, I sense the power and promise of the river. The *undertoad* lurks beneath.