

Take a Lode Off: Problems of a prophet in his own land

By Muriel Zeller | Posted: Tuesday, August 12, 2014 6:00 am

Many years ago, I tried to integrate new ideas into an organization with which I was involved, but I met resistance at every turn even though it was generally acknowledged that change was needed. When I sought his advice, a teacher who had devoted his life to advocating for peace and social justice simply told me, "It's hard to be a prophet in your own land." I would offer that same caveat to Supervisor Chris Wright as he promotes "a new way of thinking about how to protect water resources for Calaveras County."

On July 29, the Board of Supervisors met to reconsider and possibly rescind Resolution 2014-021 supporting Wild and Scenic designation for 37 miles of the upper Mokelumne River. The resolution had been passed unanimously in February, but Supervisor Cliff Edson wanted to revisit the issue after being lobbied extensively by opponents of the designation. The board retained the original resolution in a 4-1 vote, with Edson dissenting.

The supervisors who voted to retain the resolution were, at times, eloquent, determined and passionate in their remarks, but Wright was clearly the most adamant in his support of the river as he announced "a changing of the guard" and proposed "a different strategy" for protecting Calaveras water.

I am a longtime supporter of Wild and Scenic designation for the upper Mokelumne. In the interest of full disclosure, I am also a supporter and former contract employee of the Foothill Conservancy, which cosponsored state Senate Bill 1199 that will, potentially, officially designate the upper stretch of the river as Wild and Scenic. Wright is the former executive director of the Foothill Conservancy.

Opponents of the resolution suggested Wright had a conflict of interest or, at least, was unduly influenced by his former employer and his environmental background. It's often less about the message than it is about the messenger. As Wright pointed out, "Just because the Foothill Conservancy says it's a good strategy, doesn't mean they're wrong," unless you are too intractable to admit it.

Wright correctly observed that Wild and Scenic designation will protect the river from "outside interests" that have more money and political clout. However, those opposed to the designation were equally passionate and staunch in their arguments to maintain the status quo. Opponents insisted that Wild and Scenic designation would foreclose future water planning options and deprive future generations of water when it is needed.

That would be a compelling argument if Wild and Scenic designation actually precluded the application to access water reservations held by the county or counties through which the protected segment of river flows. It does not, however, provided there is a

demonstrated need for the water and the ability to extract the water without affecting the “free-flowing condition” and natural character of the river, which is not as challenging as opponents of the designation would have you believe. It has been done on other wild and scenic rivers in the state.

If Wright’s expressed hope to the water agencies and other opponents to “bring you guys along” is to be realized, opponents will have to adopt a more open-minded approach to ideas that may conflict with long-held familial, historical or political positions. As Wright said and, I think, firmly believes, “We’re on the same side.” And that is the side of Calaveras County.

During the board meeting, Wright acknowledged opponents of Wild and Scenic designation with respect. He appreciated the passion of some and the innate wisdom of others, but he insisted on a change in perspective. Protecting the river under the state Wild and Scenic Rivers Act will, ultimately, give us more local control over the river, preserve our water rights, contribute to our economic well-being and preserve something beautiful. That is a message to be embraced.

It seems to me Wright represents what I hear so many people say we need – namely, a young person who has stayed in Calaveras County to build a life. He is a native son with a social conscience who is intimately engaged in his community. He has chosen to stay in his birthplace and raise a family. It is, literally, his future that is at stake. I think he realizes that preserving a resource like the Mokelumne River will offer future generations more options, not less.

Wright’s connection to the river long predates his tenure as executive director of the Foothill Conservancy. His great-grandfather was a miner on a tributary of the Mokelumne, and his roots in the county go back for generations, which, ironically, is what may make his message suspect. It is hard to imagine how Wright could be any more in and of this land. But maybe we should listen to him anyway.

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http://www.calaverasenterprise.com/opinion/article_666b4824-21b0-11e4-8db8-001a4bcf887a.html