

# Rivers for Change

Danielle Katz paddles to inspire change and encourage river health

By Haven Livingston



On a hot and sticky August afternoon in 2012, three women came together on the banks of the Klamath River in Northern California. Season and I met up with Danielle not far below Iron Gate Dam. It was releasing just enough tepid water into the riverbed to push a raft, kayak, and channel-choking algae downstream. Despite the less than natural state of the river, the landscape of rocky cliffs and great swaths of evergreen forest was awe-inspiring.

The three of us have one singular, stand out commonality that roots us together. We are all madly, passionately, devoted to rivers. Danielle had invited us to the Klamath to join in on her journey from source to sea. She was pursuing a campaign to paddle twelve rivers source to sea

in 2012 for the nonprofit she founded, Rivers for Change.

Danielle Katz was born to river people. Her parents took her on her first river trip when she was just four months old because they thought it was important for her to see the Stanislaus River in California before it was dammed, even if she wouldn't remember it. Every summer growing up, she accompanied her dad as he ran river-rafting trips on the West Coast from California to Alaska. By age fourteen, she began guiding her own rafts.

This upbringing exposed Danielle to the recreational side of rivers, but in 2009, she took part in a source-to-sea expedition down the Mississippi River that focused her interest into three

major issues and drove her to seek out something deeper than just the adventure of river running.

"The Mississippi starts as this narrow little river. You can reach out and touch both sides of the banks with your hands. Three and a half months later, you're paddling in a 4,000 foot-wide channel with oil tankers," said Danielle. "The Mississippi trip inspired me to take a step back, look at the whole picture and develop a source-to-sea understanding of a river and its watershed."

The second striking issue Danielle observed was the disconnection between neighboring communities that depend on the same river. "It's a challenge for us all to recognize how an upstream town may be affecting a community downstream,

HAVEN LIVINGSTON



especially when that distance is more than 2,300 miles away,” she said. “Linking communities along the river is critical to understanding their interdependence.”

The third issue that compelled Danielle was the separation that she saw between adventurers and conservationists. “I’d like to see more of a bridge between people who go out and explore for fun and those working so hard to preserve and restore our natural world,” Danielle explained.

Danielle became obsessed about trying to do more to protect and restore rivers, but she’s the first to admit that she doesn’t always have the answer for how to do it. She doesn’t have a science or business background, but her enthusiasm is overwhelming. “I can talk to people and connect them to the river and its threats. Running a nonprofit is a lot like running a river. There are rapids you have to learn to navigate; sometimes your world gets flipped upside down; and you have to eddy out a lot to reassess your direction. There’s no way I could be doing this without help,” she claims, gratefully.

That’s where Season Martin and I come in. Not that we have all the answers, but Danielle’s energy is so infectious that it draws like-minded people around her who are looking for ways to make a difference. We were there to help develop a strategy that would make Rivers for Change (RFC) a sustainable organization in pursuing its mission to engage, collaborate, and promote conservation through source-to-sea adventures.

Danielle and RFC co-founder, John Dye, spent nearly all of 2012 in the whirlwind campaign to paddle twelve California rivers from source to sea. They engaged locals along the way with community paddle days, cleanups, and outreach programs. RFC collaborated with a

scientist studying climate change, collecting algae samples for him along the twelve rivers in hard-to-reach locations. RFC also coordinated with the California Native Plant Society to take members kayaking on the San Francisco Bay Delta. There, they discovered occurrences of six rare plant species in locations inaccessible by land.

Floating down the Klamath, notebook in hand, Season guided us through a process she knows well from working with other nonprofits. She led discussions and took notes until a horizon line indicated a rapid. Then the notebook was stowed in a watertight bag and we laughed our way down the whitewater. It was the embodiment of Danielle’s vision: adventure and conservation happening in the same place, the same time. In the end, we had bonded with each other and the river, and our intentions were committed to making that sort of experience possible for other people.

In 2013, California’s largest river, the Sacramento, is the focus for RFC’s source-to-sea expedition. The journey will involve community paddles, river cleanups, discussions, art projects, and the biggest event of all—the California 100, a 100-mile paddle race from Redding to Chico on the Sacramento River. “We want people to have opportunities to make a connection with a river and each other, whether that means racing, looking for insects on the banks, or having a BBQ at the water’s edge,” Danielle said. “It’s one thing to intellectually understand a river and the upstream/downstream effects, but to experience it viscerally—by feeling, touching, smelling it—creates a much deeper and intimate connection. It’s a connection that ultimately enables a larger capacity for change.”

*riversforchange.org; calriver100.com*

## Help connect the drops in ...

### 1 Hour

- Learn the basics: Look online or call your local water district to find out what watershed you live in and what the closest river or creek is. What river does your closest creek flow into?
- Find out where your tap water comes from. (Many people in L.A. get their water from reservoirs hundreds of miles away in Northern California.)
- Turn off the tap while you brush your teeth.

### 1 Day

- Explore your watershed: Seek out a riverkeeper group or local organization and get a map of your watershed. (If you can’t find one, check out *AmericanRivers.org*.)
- Walk a levee trail, go fishing, participate in a cleanup in your area.
- Join Rivers for Change on an outing! *riversforchange.org*
- Many campaigns have public comment periods, which are critical parts of the river’s voice being heard; is there an informational gathering in your area?

### 1 Week

- Volunteer to be a water quality tester: This usually requires one day of training and monthly site visits to collect data.
- Sign up with a river outfitter for a multi-day river trip to see how a river changes.
- Take a pledge to fix leaky faucets and only run full dishwasher and washing machine loads.

### 1 Year

- Join an ongoing campaign.
- Help organize a river cleanup.
- Find out how you can make a blue trail near you. *bluetrailsguide.org/about*
- Find a way to help kids make a connection to their water source and get to know a river.
- Become the voice for your river.