The Tales of the San Joaquin: A River Restored (DVD, 58 minutes, cbfilms.net)

Produced and directed by Christopher Beaver and funded by the State of California’s Resource Agency for the CALFED Bay–Delta program, this beautiful documentary takes us on a 350-mile journey from the source of the San Joaquin, in the Sierra Nevada near Yosemite Park, to the San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean. In narrating the life and changes of the San Joaquin River, the film focuses on three key aspects. The first is the joy that the river provided people and its historical significance in the lives of many generations. The second is the negative impact that we humans have had on the river and the loss of different species, specifically salmon. The problems revolve around the building of the Friant Dam, a concrete gravity dam on the San Joaquin River, which forms a boundary between Fresno and Madera counties. The building of the dam began in 1937 and was completed in 1942 as part of a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation water project. Its goal was to provide irrigation water to the southern San Joaquin Valley. The diversion of water from this dam and the different canal systems developed by this project disrupted the river’s flow pattern, and in some areas the river turned into a desert. The impact of these changes is shown through a series of interviews with local people, farmers and grape producers, as the film alternates between historical images of the river and its present-day decline.

Demonstrating that people can make a difference, the third aspect of the film shows how activism helped restore the river. In 1946, a group of farmers sued to protect the river, others donated land to make parks for preservation and to clean up the river. The end of the film presents the final lawsuit, settled after 20 years’ litigation, which allowed the water to flow through the dam after more than 62 years. This release of water will permit the restoration of the river, improve water quality, and allow for the reestablishment of salmon. In essence, a dead river brought back to life.

The film is appropriate for any grade level, from 4th to 12th. However, like the long winding river itself, the film dragged a bit in the middle. For this reason, despite the film’s beauty, I would not present it in its entirety.

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