

# BIG RIVER

## revisited

by M.L. FISCHER

Special to the Sentinel

The news that the state had purchased 7,334 acres of land surrounding the Big River in Mendocino not only cheered me but brought back a flood of memories.

For a decade, I made an annual trek to the Mendocino coast to camp, kayak, hike and surf. Because of the wonderful paddling in the area, kayaking has been the main activity on those weeks.

Mendocino offers two different kayak experiences. There is ocean kayaking in and around the caves and sea caves. Or you can paddle along the peaceful tidal rivers: Noyo, Big, Albion and Navarro.

Each river has its own charm, but the Big is a favorite of the majority of paddlers. It is wide, open, lush, and it goes for miles.

There are no farms, towns or homes along the river.

There was a time when one could find a space filled with tranquillity and silence on the Big River. Then it all changed. But perhaps that time has come again.

My first trip up river was magical. Not knowing what to expect, I launched at the beach just inland from the Highway 1 bridge and started up past the myrtle weeds.

Shortly, I heard the rumble of an unseen logging truck on the dirt road that parallels the river.

As I entered the deep woods, there was nothing but the gentle splash of water, the joyful songs of birds, and the whispering rustle of the wind in the leaves above me.

As the river narrowed, the trees made a canopy for me, turning the sunlight to a dappled green glow.

Along the road deciduous trees dropped lazy leaves in my

path, while rows of redwoods fenced the river off from whatever was happening on the land.

Scurries of ducks slipped between fallen branches along the shore, and raptors sliced the narrow strip of sky.

An occasional deserted boat punctuated the scene. For a few hours I experienced a private wilderness, as if I were a one-man Lewis and Clark expedition.

When I reached a giant, fallen redwood that blocked the river some eight miles up, I turned around to battle the rising wind and be mesmerized by silver light dancing on the afternoon chop.

Returning to the beach, civilization brought me back to the present. There were cars on the beach, and Mendocino stood silhouetted on the bluff above, reminding me that I needed to dine and camp.

There is great camping at Van Damme, Russian Gulch and McKerricher State parks. But if you'd rather have more comfortable accommodations, the town of Mendocino has some quaint (if very pricey) bed and breakfasts, great for that romantic getaway.

For more reasonable and practical accommodations, I suggest Fort Bragg, only 15 minutes north. The small town offers abundant motels in a variety of price ranges, and restaurants run from Denny's to fine seafood dining on the docks.

One of my favorite places to stay is the Seabird, right on the highway, about a block north of the Noyo River. The rates are reasonable, and they have an indoor heated pool.

Right in front on the motel is a Perko's coffee shop where you can get an excellent breakfast.

If you'd like to walk from your room to a beach, there are several motels on the sand at the north end of town. Behind them is a walking and biking road that runs for quite a distance.

When in the Mendocino area, don't miss a ride

on the Skunk Train through the redwoods. Then stop across Highway 1 from the train station at the North Coast Brewery for a cold pint and lunch.

Even if you don't stay in Mendocino Village, at least stroll down the town's Main Street and visit the art galleries. Then wander along the bluff over Mendocino Bay and the entrance to Big River.

### Silence again

Big River continued to be a favored destination until the last time I visited, four or five years ago.

About two miles in from the beach, I heard what sounded like "Hell, the Musical."

There was metallic screeching and crunching. At a clearing I didn't remember seeing on prior trips, I found the source of the noise: a timber operation less than a half mile from the river.

The slope was far too steep for vehicles, so they used pulleys and cables to drag down the logs.

The place was apparently being clear cut. That the following winter would bring mud slides was obvious.

I stopped, shocked. Something I loved was being violated. The tranquillity evaporated into the clear, unsentimental air of industrial efficiency. I've yet to return.

Next June, when the soft fog creates a dreamscape, I'll paddle the Big River again, enjoying the silence again now that the state has purchased the land.

Do come. Bring your kayak or rent one there. If I see you, perhaps I'll point out an osprey nest.

The Big River is located just south of Mendocino. Kayak rentals are available.

Corralitos writer M. L. Fischer is the author of "Shattering the Crystal Face of God."