

# Commercial outfitters launch rafting season

BY JOHN ELLIOTT

They've been cruising Kaweah Country for the last several weeks. Most of their vehicles have a kayak or two strapped on top or in a trailer with several inflatable rafts in tow.

They watch the weather by day and listen to the rolling river thunder revue each night. Sometimes in the morning, and sometimes in the heat of the spring day, they might be seen paddling the river checking any or all of the renowned rapids from Hospital Rock to Holiday Falls.

For Kaweah Country, this is a relatively new breed of visitor who discovered the Middle Fork of the Kaweah River in the early 1990s. They are men and women dressed in Polartec and Teva sandals, mostly in their 20s, and looking like they just stepped off the pages of *River* magazine, a new journal of paddlesport and

river adventure, published in Bozeman, Mont.

These April-May arrivals, with the exception of Kaweah Whitewater Adventures, the sole locally-based rafting company, are the advance guides of a half-dozen commercial companies who hope to soon be bringing in paying clients by the busload.

Last Friday, as if on cue, the Kaweah managers of companies Whitewater Voyages, Whitewater Connection, and Beyond Limits launched their first significant commercial trips of the season.

The reason for the "unofficial" start of the season was that the Middle Fork of the Kaweah was sustaining a daytime flow above the magical 2,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) threshold. Water levels on the local river at or slightly above 2,000 c.f.s. are ideal for most clients who are seeking the popular Class IV+ experience.



**RIVER RECREATIONISTS:** Rafters paddle vigorously on their approach to Suicide Falls. Sustained flows around 2,000 cfs that began Friday, May 5, have made the Middle Fork of the Kaweah ideal for a whitewater adventure.

This challenging run is recommended only for the fit, active, experienced paddlers with strong swimming ability who are able to stay in a wildly tossing boat all the while paddling vigorously. Wet suits are required early in the season because of the snowmelt-driven water that can render an unprotected swimmer hypothermic in a matter of minutes.

A typical commercial package with one of the larger outfitters includes two days of rafting, accommodations, and at least some the meals and snacks. Clients shell out several hundred dollars for the guided trips through the scenic

Kaweah canyon.

"Last weekend, the river was ideal for commercial runs," said Amicaya Frediani, Kaweah manager for Whitewater Voyages. "There were 50 or 60 rafters booked by the four or five companies that were operating that weekend."

Frediani said that most of his company's trips this month are booked for weekends. The peak of the season is expected to be around Memorial Day.

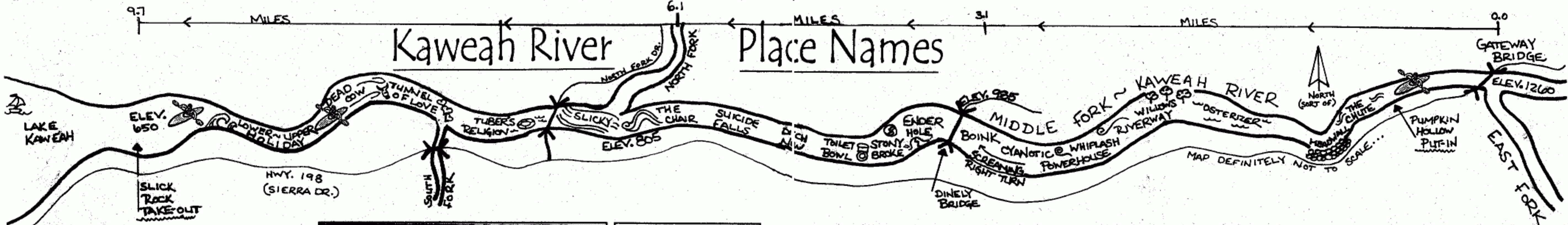
Tulare County, under the provisions of the Kaweah River Management Plan, has licensed eight companies to operate on

the Kaweah River during the current season. All are subject to specific conditions, which include designated places to park, put in, meal/rest stops, take out, and camp.

Among the sanctioned meal/rest stops are Anne Lang's Emporium, Naturedome, and the Riverview Restaurant. Dorletta Hildebrand, who along with her husband Rex, owns the Riverview, says she enjoys having the rafters put in for lunch.

"The rafters really help my business while it's still a little

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# Rafting the Kaweah

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slow before the summer season," she said. Local business owners and the rafting companies are looking for some improvement over 1999. Because of a shortened season and low water levels, only 292 commercial rafts were documented last year. Some rafters thought that the publicity about recent rafting-related deaths, including one last

season on the Kaweah, might have discouraged some would-be clients. According to a recent study published in *River* magazine, in the eight-year period between 1990 and 1997, 22 deaths occurred on commercially-guided rafting expeditions. The study examined 15 rivers that had significant commercial activity throughout the United States. Of the 22 deaths, 14 were drownings and eight were

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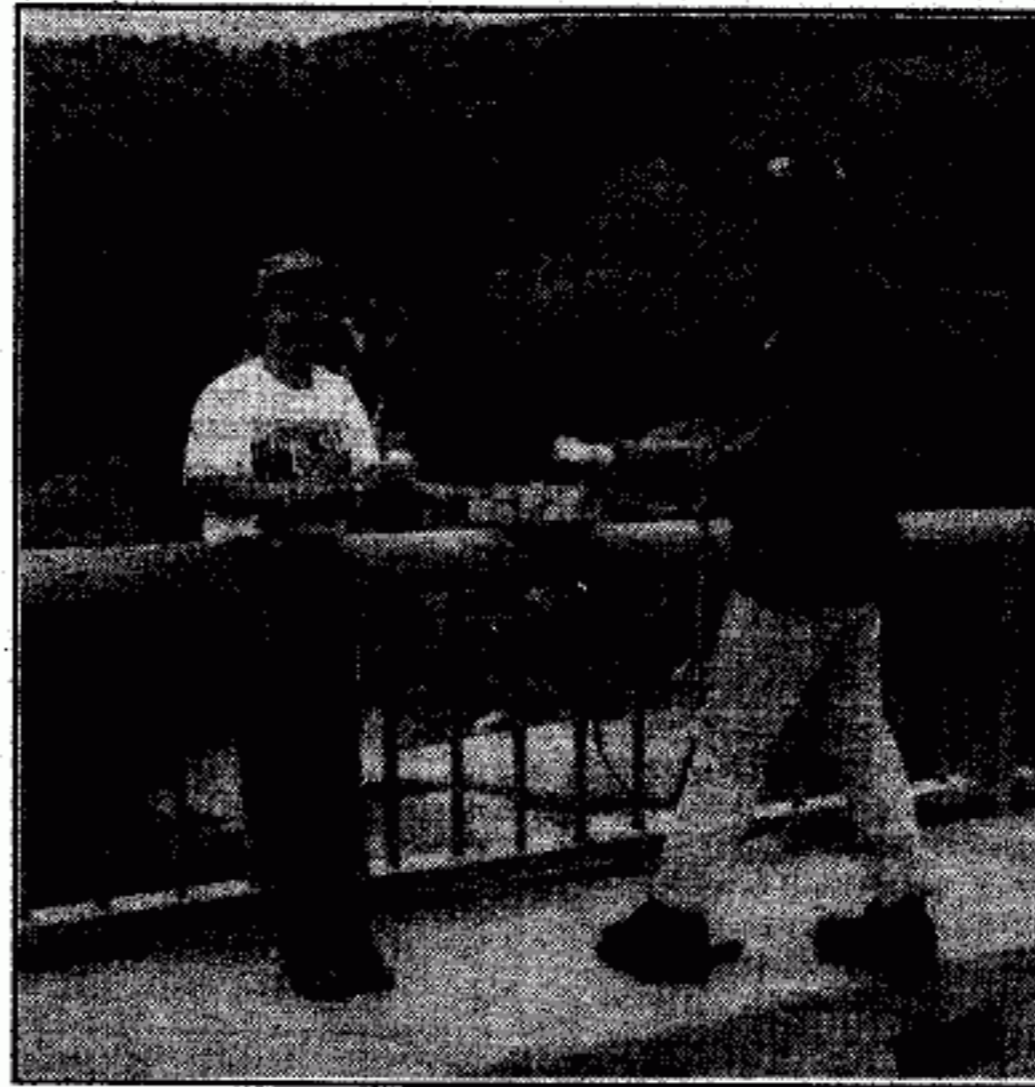
KAWEAH KAYAKER

## Rating the river

Rivers are rated I through VI, with I being the easiest and VI virtually impossible to navigate even by the most extreme river-runner. River difficulty may change each year due to factors such as water level, weather, obstacles, or floods.

The Kaweah River is rated a Class III to Class IV+, depending on the time of year and the rafting route. A plus sign means there may be one or more rapids with difficulty slightly above the level indicated.

- Class I — Easy  
Small waves, passages clear, no serious obstacles.
- Class II — Novice  
Rapids of moderate difficulty with wide, clear channels.
- Class III — Intermediate  
Numerous waves that are high and irregular, rocks, eddies (whirlpools), clear passages though narrow, requires expertise in maneuvering.
- Class IV — Advanced  
Long rapids, powerful and irregular waves, dangerous rocks, boiling eddies, powerful and precise maneuvering required.
- Class V — Expert  
Long and violent rapids which follow each other almost without interruption, obstructed riverbed, big drops, violent currents, very steep.
- Class VI — Extreme  
Unpredictable and highly dangerous. Portage is necessary to avoid a Class VI stretch of river.



## Rafting

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health-related from causes like heart attack and respiratory failure.

In contrast, over 21,000 people

died in car accidents in 1997 alone. "Too bad we can't drive back and forth to work in rafts," the magazine concluded.

Bill Pooley, an avid kayaker who is a rafting-season resident of Three Rivers and riverfront property owner, has a comprehensive website detailing everything anyone needs to know

## River rap

If you want to raft the raft, you have to talk the talk:

- Eddies**— A whirlpool.
- Holes**— When water drops over an obstacle, it curls back on itself, forming a strong upstream current that is capable of holding an entire raft or stray rafter.
- Strainers**— Brush, fallen trees, bridge pilings, rocks, or other debris that allows the river current to funnel through, but can pin a raft and rafters against the obstacle.
- Put-In**— Point of entry into a waterway.
- Take-Out**— Hoist the raft... the trip's over.



## RIVER RUNNERS

**ABOVE LEFT:** The husband and wife team of Dotty and Dan Garrigue of Sierra Hydrographics, based in Auberry, calculate the flow of the Kaweah River from the North Fork Bridge.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** The raft tipped dramatically and two rafters were dumped, but quickly pulled from the turgid water below Suicide Falls. Nearby support rafts were strategically placed at the base of the rapid to quickly retrieve the wayward rafters.