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Crossing Stevens Creek

Huffing over the brand-new overpass connecting his street to Stevens Creek, my middle-school self hardly comprehended the Rubicon he had crossed as well. Equipped with a bike, I discovered a conduit to all of Mountain View and more: a place for dates, family outings, commutes, and timed miles. I became myself at Stevens Creek, and I will soon have the opportunity to grow at the LA River. Until then, mostly YouTube videos will influence my idea of the LA River. However, while Stevens Creek and the LA river both provide a haven from urban sprawl, the Glendale Narrows of the LA River reflects division and decay, while Stevens Creek embodies community and progress.

While Stevens Creek runs north from the Santa Cruz Mountains to the San Francisco Bay, the trailed portion comprises three segments in Mountain View, the first of which exemplifies the tranquility offered by both rivers. My first time crossing over to the southern section, a vast riparian habitat of golden dormant grass, scattered trees and bushes, and power lines greeted me. Enveloped in a microcosm of the hot, dry Santa Clara Valley climate, I hiked past wrentits and hermit thrushes, identified by educational signs. Both rivers allow people to become their best selves. My family tradition of a Sunday bike ride and brunch by the Bay began here. I have even taken dates here. Just as the Glendale Narrows provides a second home to joggers and runners, after I dislocated my knee and lost the ability to play lateral sports, I became a high school cross-country runner under the California Sycamores and Fremont Cottonwoods of

Stevens Creek (Gragos). Just as fishermen in Southern California find mirror carp in the LA River near Griffith Park, fishermen here meet Belted Kingfisher and Western Pond Turtles, the only turtle native to Northern California (Gourley). Both rivers present an island of nature and mobility in an ocean of highways and pavement.

The second segment of Stevens Creek begins to highlight the differences between the two streams. While railroads flank and restrict the LA River to passersby, the Stevens Creek Trail rises above the Caltrain tracks and strip malls that crisscross Mountain View, providing more access to the city. Here, as the parched, sun-kissed stream quickly becomes a shaded, dense micro-jungle bobbing and weaving through city roads, the underbelly of Stevens Creek peeks into view. The underpasses resemble canvases for graffiti and garbage, but it ends there, and the remainder of the trail is spotless. In contrast, the underbelly of the LA River does not peek, but rather barges into view in the form of defacement, trash, and needles at parts of Glendale and Atwater Village (Gragos). Crowds of homeless people have no choice but to inhabit certain portions, settling in tents and creating fires, and in response, the more affluent joggers and bikers seem to congregate in the different parts (Gragos). I do not think homeless people themselves do not cause the river's problems, but I feel disillusioned at seeing different groups failing to share the trail. At any time of year, water fountains, portable toilets, and flyers for group runs and trail etiquette dot billboards along Stevens Creek, unifying trail users, while simply jogging along some parts of the LA River provokes class conflict. Each river's features reveal how different types of people use the trail in harmony, like Stevens Creek, or discord, as in the case of the LA River.

Just as the final, northern section of Stevens Creek embodies the unity and advancement represented by the entire river, it also highlights the attrition and estrangement of the Glendale

Narrows portion of the LA River. Stevens Creek enters a vast, windy wetlands biome as it merges with the San Francisco Bay, denoted by the odor of sulfur. My first time traversing the river, only a few power lines, some logging trucks, and the NASA Ames Center interrupted the miles of impassable grass. Since then, I have seen progress in the directions of nature and civilization: a new Google Campus, Microsoft Office, military base, apartment bloc, and parking garage, complemented by widespread control of wild areas for rehabilitation. Young software engineers commute to their groundbreaking startups by the river. The bridge connecting the river to my neighborhood represents one of these improvements. Before virtually exploring the LA River, I took for granted the cleanliness, conservation, and maintenance of Stevens Creek, but now I notice the community effort required to achieve it. Discreet plaques adorn the entire river thanking donors, whether local governments, individuals, or organizations, like the Rotary Club. One reads “Stevens Creek adopted by Kiddie Academy of Mountain View.” The Mountain View community elevates Stevens Creek, but unfortunately the Glendale Narrows community seems to clash with itself regarding the LA River. While the homeless members leave garbage and other people vandalize, the local government fails to address either issue, which disappoints me. This situation leaves disgruntled volunteers to clean graffiti and pick up trash by themselves—a Sisyphean task (Klemack). One such volunteer expressed his disappointment: “Nothing’s illegal anymore . . . If I ask the police, ‘if you see somebody urinating over on the side of the car, would you arrest them?’ ‘No.’ ‘If you see me do it?’ ‘Yeah, I would arrest you because you can pay for the bond’ . . . and I don’t blame them” (Klemack). Reading this, I feel grateful for Stevens Creek’s wealthy donors and active government. While Stevens Creek represents the community coming together to share responsibility, the LA River acts as a chance for local parties to shirk responsibility.

Similarly to the LA River, the Stevens Creek occasionally experiences floods, and each community's response epitomizes the differences between the rivers. I love when Stevens Creek temporarily closes to repair the damage and reopens better than before. I recall one storm caused an entire chunk of the trail to collapse into the river. Before long, safety fences and detour signs sprang up, while a cadre of construction vehicles began rapidly paving a new trail. When the LA River floods, the city and community neglect homeless people to fend for themselves, often to the point of requiring perilous rescues by the LAFD (Central Bureau). When a recent proposal to build a homeless shelter in Los Feliz sparked opposition from local homeowners who feared lowered property values, the community appeared split along its seams (Chandler). During crisis, Stevens Creek's response illustrates the unity of Mountain View, while the Glendale Narrows's actions seem to inflame the divisions of LA.

While Stevens Creek and the LA River both offer a respite from bustling city life, the Glendale Narrows portion of the LA River evinces conflict and decay, while Stevens Creek demonstrates accord and evolution. Fishermen, bikers, and joggers treasure the nature, solitude, and tranquility of both rivers. Homelessness, class disparities, and political conflict exist everywhere on Earth, even in an affluent tech hub like Mountain View. Even so, the donations, group runs, and rapid flood response depict the acme of Mountain View's best qualities. In contrast, the interests of homeless people, homeowners, police, and politicians seem to clash around the LA River. Either way, I hope that crossing the LA River for the first time opens the same opportunities for growth as crossing Stevens Creek did over five years ago.

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