

Adventure at a waterfall

- 1 Curtis Whitson felt sick to his stomach when he realized that he, his girlfriend and his 13-year-old son were suddenly stranded on an isolated stretch of California's Arroyo Seco tributary. They had reached the most difficult part of their four-day floating and camping trip over the summer, and they were trapped atop a raging, 40-foot waterfall. A rope that was supposed to be secured at the top of the waterfall – the only safe way down – was missing. There was no way to climb out of the gorge.
- 2 Thoughts raced through Whitson's mind: Heavy spring rains had likely washed the rope away. There was no other way to get down safely. He had packed a rope in his camping gear, but he estimated that the water was too swift and high to attempt to attach his rope and abseil down. Friends knew they were in Arroyo Seco, but it might be several days before a search party was dispatched. There was no cell service. He desperately needed a plan.
- 3 Whitson looked at his lime-green Nalgene water bottle, and he suddenly had an idea: He scratched "HELP!" on each side of the bottle and scribbled an SOS note on a piece of paper with the date, June 15, and their whereabouts – then tucked it inside. He tossed the bottle over the waterfall and silently begged the universe for somebody downstream to find it.
- 4 It was a very long shot. "We've done all we can do," he recalled telling his girlfriend and son after he dropped the bottle over the edge. "The only thing left to do now is wait." Remarkably, they didn't have to wait long. About midnight, they were awakened by a voice from a loudspeaker: "This is search and rescue – you have been found! Stay put and we'll be back to get you tomorrow morning." Whitson could barely believe that his message in a bottle was discovered within hours of tossing it over the waterfall.
- 5 The three of them later found out that about a quarter-mile downstream, two hikers had spotted the bright green bottle right away, read the note and hiked to the Arroyo Seco Campground to alert the manager to call a search and rescue team. Although it was growing too dark for a rescue operation, a California Highway Patrol helicopter pilot decided to do a flyover with his crew before the end of their shift. Using night vision goggles and infrared technology to detect heat from a campfire, they were able to spot the stranded trio. The next morning, a second California Highway Patrol helicopter crew arrived at 10 a.m. to lift each of them to safety. "As you can imagine, they were very happy to see us," the pilot said.

Washington Post, 2019