

# TITANIC POWERS

Carving through the bedrock  
of user-issues on the  
Grand Canyon's Colorado River

*By Jean DuBail*

Originally published in the River Explorer, Bozeman Montana,  
April/May 2000 issue. *Used here by permission of author. The  
River Explorer is no longer in business and could not be contacted.*

---

---

The Colorado River took five million years, give or take a few, to carve the Grand Canyon. At the rate things are going it might take humans that long to agree on how this national treasure should be managed for future generations.

I exaggerate, of course. The canyon was carved through geologic time where a human lifetime scarcely registers. But it's no exaggeration to say that a human lifetime would be more than enough to mar, perhaps even to ruin what took Nature eternities to create. So, for those who care about the canyon's future, but who care about it in different and often conflicting ways, time presses. Millions of years aren't passing, but sometimes it seems that way.

The immediate issue crops up all over the country, but particularly in the West: How to preserve and protect wild places without making them inaccessible to all but the hardest—or wealthiest—segments of the population. In Grand Canyon National Park, that larger issue subsumes a host of others, each of which brings into play an array of competing public and private interests: Whether and how to limit tourism and

development, whether and how to limit automobile and air traffic and, perhaps most contentious of all, how best to manage the resource that gave rise to it all, the river.

It's absurd even to speak of "managing" the Colorado. Like any of the world's great whitewater rivers, you take it on its own terms, or not at all. If you lack a decent respect for its power, its capriciousness and its dangers, you are better off viewing it from atop the canyon rims—the way 99 percent of park visitors see it.

Yet the Colorado is managed nearly to death, some would say. It is dammed at many points above and below the canyon, so its flow is governed not by the whims of nature but by human demand for electricity. The unintended side effect has been a dramatic transformation of the river's ecology; the once mud-brown water now generally runs clear and cold, exotic plants and animals have replaced native species, and the catastrophic floods that used to scour the riverbanks no longer occur.

Yet the wildness is far from gone. The night sky still teems with stars; the waters, woods, and desert still harbor

abundant wildlife; life is still ruled by the elements, not the clock and calendar. And the sheer immensity of the place is undiminished; it is still easy—and dangerous—to get lost.

And the river still runs. To ply its waters, never truly quiet and often whipped to a mad froth, is to feel the titanic powers that made the earth.

*Hance Rapid, July 13. We start well enough, sliding past the big boulder at the top and pulling quickly to the right. The current seizes us, our speed increases, icy spray lashes our faces. I'm in the front of the raft, hooting and yeehawing for all I'm worth. Suddenly we seesaw over the crest of an enormous standing wave, and it's as if the bottom falls out of the boat. We fall six feet, maybe more, and slam with teeth-rattling force on a rock the size of a Volkswagen, maybe bigger. I look uneasily at our boatman, Tim, who looks a bit uneasy himself.*

*We get no worse from Hance besides a good soaking, but we spend the rest of the day bailing steadily. The next day, while we're hiking out of the canyon, Tim and the rest of the crew will upend the emptied boat and spend hours repairing the ugly gash beneath.*

The river is wild, all right. But is it a wilderness?

Technically, the answer is no. Like many national parks, Grand Canyon has never been granted official wilderness designation from Congress. But the National Park Service has always managed nearly all of its 1.2 million acres as if it had, meaning that much of the Park is off limits to motorized traffic and to permanent structures of any kind.

But the Colorado itself, though long classified as “potential” wilderness by the Park Service, has never been managed as one. Motorized rafts have

shot the rapids for decades, and are now the main source of revenue for the Park's \$25 million-a-year commercial rafting industry.

The Service once tried to phase out motor traffic, during the 1980 revisions of the Park's management plan. The result was a furious political backlash from outfitters, who got Congress to pass a measure that effectively prevented the Park from carrying out its plan.

It did not go unremarked at the time or in the years since that the outfitters' chief ally in this effort was Utah GOP Sen. Orrin Hatch, who is distantly related to the owner of one of the park's biggest rafting companies. Whether Hatch acted out of loyalty to family or from traditional Republican sympathy for business, the effect of his intervention is that the Park Service has been handcuffed ever since.

It was no surprise, therefore, that the river corridor was excluded from a wilderness management plan drafted by Park officials for release in 1998. What was surprising was the intensity of the reaction from wilderness advocates, who ridiculed the suggestion that the canyon could be managed separately from the river that made it.

“It seemed totally inappropriate,” said Sandy Bahr, conservation coordinator for the Grand Canyon Chapter of the Sierra Club. “They were just punting.”

Among the loudest voices in this chorus of opposition was that of the 500-member Grand Canyon Private Boaters Association, founded in 1996 to represent the interests of non-commercial river runners. Its official statement on the issue argued that “such an ecosystem inherently requires management as a single unit under a single integrated wilderness plan,” and

that motorized traffic is “fundamentally incompatible” with wilderness status. Overwhelmed by this opposition, and perhaps sensing that the political winds had shifted, Park officials decided to consider wilderness issues in conjunction with a previously separate management plan for the river, but by February 2000, it had become obvious to officials that they were trying to reconcile the irreconcilable. Faced with bitter and growing divisions among competing interests, they felt they had no alternative but to suspend the planning process until Congress resolves the wilderness issue.

That may take years, if it happens at all. In the meantime, the Park Service has promised to change management practices in a way that might benefit all parties. Linda Jalbert, Project Leader for the management plans says, “I would like to think that if the decision is changed, and it can be changed, that we can pick up where we left off.”

At stake in all this, is what bureaucrats call the “desired future condition” of the river corridor.

Needless to say, the outfitters’ views on that subject are diametrically opposed to those of the wilderness advocates.

Their official statement contends that the Park Service is bound by the 1916 legislation that created it to “balance the resource protection with visitor use and enjoyment,” and that officials have all the authority they need to protect the river without conferring wilderness status. They also expressed concern about the wording of the draft plan, which they said hints at the Park’s intention eventually to eliminate motorized traffic. This would not only be illegal, they argued, but unnecessary. Conversion of the motorized fleet to cleaner and quieter four-stroke engines

is already under way, and some outfitters are experimenting with emission-free electric motors.

What might be their strongest argument, however, is a practical one: That a ban on motors would dramatically reduce access to the river. That’s because a motorized raft takes about half as long to make a trip through the canyon as an oar or paddleboat. And since the park maintains a strict limit on user-days — each day one person spends on the river is counted as a user-day — banning motors would nearly halve the number of people allowed to make commercial trips each year.

“We just don’t see that as a good trade-off,” said Mark Grisham, executive director of the Grand Canyon River Outfitters Association. “It would shut out the experience for the majority of Americans.”

It would also make the river feel a good deal more crowded. Oared boats can’t move much faster or farther than the current, and so have a narrower range of choices for campsites and other stopping places. For motorized boats, speed confers flexibility; it makes it easier to stay out of the other fellow’s way. Oar boaters know this as well as anybody.

“If we ran 22,000 people down here a year in oar boats, there’d be a congestion problem you wouldn’t believe,” said Bert Jones, who has rowed the canyon more than [138] times in 26 years, mostly for a company called Outdoors Unlimited.

The possibility that wilderness designation might have such effects, which in turn might force the Park to further limit user-days, worries some private boaters. They’re looking for more access, not less, and they don’t

want to back the Park Service into a corner.

“We could be shooting ourselves in the foot,” said Willie Odem, vice president for the private boaters group.

Yet access would be an issue even if wilderness designation were not. Private boaters have long complained of what they call a “gross injustice” in the allocation of user-days; about three-fourths of the 170,000 annual limit goes to commercial outfitters.

Compounding the frustration is the Park’s infamous “waiting list” for private launch permits. Given that some 7,000 people are now on the list, and that just 270 private launches are allowed each year, the reason for that frustration is obvious.

Odem’s experience is typical. He went on the list in February 1990, and didn’t get his trip until September of 1999. Another irritant is the Park’s cancellation policy, which offers unused slots on a first-come, first-served basis. It’s fine for those with speed dial and the ability to arrange a trip on short notice, which often means people living nearest to the canyon, but it’s not popular among those with less flexible schedules.

“Everybody acknowledges that the system is screwed up,” Odem said.

Being a permittee isn’t the only way of getting on the river, of course; it’s often possible to go as part of someone else’s group, as Odem has. This practice is common enough for the Park Service to keep track of individual rafters by computer; those who take two trips during their time on the waiting list have their names struck off.

Though the outfitters don’t suffer because of these arrangements, they acknowledge that others do.

“For out part, commercial companies recognize that there is a legitimate

problem on the private side,” Grisham said. “We’re trying hard to figure out ways we can make changes in our position.”

They draw the line, however at a reallocation of user-days, as the private boaters have demanded. Which leaves one other solution: raising the limit. But this approach, too, is problematic, for reasons both practical and ecological.

The river already carries about as much traffic as it can handle in the peak season, which runs from May through September. Nearly all the commercial trips and most of the private ones launch during this period. Few run the river during the fall and winter months.

To gauge interest in more secondary-season use, the Park Service added some 50 launch dates over the last two winters (without counting the user-days against the private boaters’ allocation). Interest was high, naturally, and all the dates have been claimed.

The Park Service’s Jalbert warns, however, that there are limits to secondary-season use. Running more trips during the winter, for example, would have a greater impact on wildlife concentrated in the warm inner canyon, and spring trips might disturb migratory birds or nesting bald eagles. Nature also needs time to recover from the impacts of the peak season.

It’s just these kinds of impacts that lead wilderness advocates to argue that river access should be curtailed, not increased. Given that quiet water near campsites sometimes gives off the whiff of urine – the Park Service considers it better to pee in the river than on the banks – it’s hard to deny that the argument has merit.

*Marble Canyon, July 13. The afternoon rain strikes with uncommon fury, slashing down at a 40-degree angle*

*from the wind-whipped surface of the river. We have no choice but to wait it out, sitting glumly in our rain jackets while the stinging drops pelt our exposed skin. But the rain eventually tapers off, and the show begins. The Redwall comes alive with waterfalls, some diving straight into the river from atop the cliffs; others pounding themselves to vapor on the rocks below. This one is a mere ribbon of clear water, swaying in the dying wind; that one is choked with sediments nearly the color of blood. The clear springs at Vasey's Paradise are dwarfed by a torrent falling from above, and one thin stream bisects the entrance to Redwall Cavern. We are spellbound by the spectacle, and even the guides are impressed.*

*"I've never seen it like this," says Randy, who's been here many times.*

That storm eventually broke, but the one that started with release of the park wilderness plan shows few signs of doing so.

"There's a very high level of hostility out there right now," said the outfitters' Grisham. "But there are good people all around. It's a matter of getting beyond trying to assign blame and getting down to a way of working things out."

That will take time, since the management planning process is on hold. And until that process is complete, months or even years from now, the same competing economic and political interests will be at work, and the same bureaucratic limits will constrain and frustrate the would-be boater. In other words, the waiting list is, for the foreseeable future, a fact of life.

Yet if any river is worth the wait, surely it's the Colorado.

"If this isn't the best trip in the world," said veteran guide Bert Jones, "it's darn close."