

An 'A-ticket' ride

Motor rafting must remain as a Grand Canyon delight

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"About eleven o'clock we hear a great roar ahead, and approach it very cautiously. The sound grows louder and louder as we run, and at last we find ourselves above a long, broken fall, with ledges and pinnacles of rock obstructing the river. There is a descent of perhaps 75 or 80 feet in a third of a mile, and the rushing waters break into great waves on the rocks, and lash themselves into a mad, white foam."

- **John Wesley Powell**, explorer and author of *"The Exploration of the Colorado River and its Canyons."*

Heart-pounding thrills as the boat's bow nearly reaches vertical. Stomach-churning drops when gravity pushes it down into the swirling white water.

Cold spray that invigorates. Side canyons that satisfy curiosity. Gourmet food. Fast-paced adventure juxtaposed with tranquil moments to drift and reflect, letting God's grandeur touch you in ways too difficult to put in words.

River trips along the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon aren't the dangerous treks encountered by Powell and his men, first in 1869 and again in 1872.

But whether powered by oar or by motor, these special journeys back in time give people of all ages an incredible experience. Being on the river offers a far different perspective of Grand Canyon National Park than peering a mile down from a crowded South Rim overlook, or taking in the panorama from a cushy seat in a fixed-wing plane.

Obviously, there must be a healthy balance between public access and the preservation of the resource values that make the Grand Canyon so special.

That's why there are limits on river use - appropriate curbs that seemingly run counter to the nation's growing appetite for wilderness experience.

Access to the Grand Canyon along the river is primed to be a major issue as the National Park Service designs a new river-use plan by the end of 2004.

There are those who want the park service to designate the entire park, including the 250-mile river corridor, as wilderness and phase out motorized expeditions. A 1980 management plan suggested the phase-out, but the idea was overturned by Congress.

Wilderness advocates want to preserve the canyon for reflective recreation, to get rid of the noise from outboard engines that, according to some, ruin the canyon experience for others. This is not unlike the 15-year fight over aircraft noise in the canyon's airspace.

We believe the river corridor as wilderness would be misguided - and elitist - public policy. Quiet technology, switching from two-stroke to four-stroke engines, is lessening the drone of the outboard motors. There's reason to believe the motors can become even quieter and less polluting.

Motorized trips do not harm the resource. They don't leave a footprint. In that sense, they are just like oar trips.

Simple fairness dictates that motorized trips should stay. They've been part of the canyon landscape for five decades, thrilled



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Motorized raft trips provide a Grand Canyon experience to many who could not float the river any other way.

countless thousands and energized thousands more to become advocates for protecting special places like the Grand Canyon.

Let's face it. These days, most people don't have the time or the physical endurance for a two-week oar trip. It would be an injustice to deprive them a chance to float down the Colorado River.

The Grand Canyon River Outfitters Association predicts a huge drop in the number of people on a professionally outfitted trip - from 19,000 to perhaps 8,000 or 9,000 annually - if trips become oar-only. Is this what the American people want?

We don't think it is. Nor does it make sense for the Park Service. The industry pulls in \$30 million a year and funnels \$2.4 million to the Park Service in concession fees - an amount that would plummet without motorized rafts.

Here's what needs to happen:

Congress must finally decide which parts of the Grand Canyon National Park will be wilderness. That should *not* include the river corridor.

Then the Park Service can move ahead and adopt a plan that continues to allow highly regulated use of motorized rafts.

A river trip is a magnificent experience. The public should not lose access to what is often a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

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