

## **Grand Canyon Wilderness with Motors – Not a Contradiction, a Necessity**

by

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### **Who I Am**

I've participated for thirty years in the various planning and legislative actions that have shaped management at Grand Canyon National Park today. I've worked for leading non-profit conservation advocacy groups (National Park Conservation Association, as Vice President for Policy), conservation public service groups (Student Conservation Association, as Executive Vice-President), a federal agency (National Park Service, as Assistant Director), the recreation professional society (National Recreation and Park Association, as Executive Director), and currently as a parks and outdoor recreation consultant (to the Grand Canyon River Outfitters Association, among others).

I've worked in favor of every piece of proposed national park wilderness legislation since 1972, which is most of the fifty million acres of statutory national park wilderness in America today.

I've run the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon twice, first in the mid-70's on an oar trip, and most recently in 2000 on a motor rig. I've run a few other wild rivers as well, including the Colorado through Utah's Canyonlands, the New River Gorge in West Virginia (more than 20 times), the Yampa in Colorado and Utah, and the Rogue in Oregon. These special places, set aside for all of us and our children to enjoy, have obvious limitations on the types of uses allowed and how many at a time can use them without adversely impacting either the resources of the area, or other people's experiences in them. Like most wilderness users, when I'm backpacking or otherwise visiting the backcountry, I want to minimize contact with folks not in the group I'm with. I want these special places to have limits, to have high standards, and above all, to be protected forever in an unimpaired condition. As always, proper management of these special places means finding the right balance between preservation and use. This is what the law requires.

### **Wilderness Management is not an Oxymoron**

The job of agency management, and park management plans, is to make the sometimes hard decisions, in public, so that wild places will be there for us to enjoy now and in the future, while leaving the resources unimpaired. Some folks, like Kim Crumbo in his *bqr* article "A Wilderness River," think that wilderness management is an oxymoron, that management is the opposite of wilderness. Perhaps unfortunately, they are wrong for these times, given the intense and increasing demands for use of wild places. They may be right for the wilderness "idea," but they are incorrect when it comes to the practicalities of managing areas that meet the statutory definition of wilderness.

Wilderness management is perhaps more difficult than management of regular public lands, or even non-wilderness national parks, simply because the law, and agency regulations and management policies, require the agency in charge to delicately balance

access, preservation, and the quality of each person's experience in wilderness. This forces the NPS and other agencies into the position of deciding upon and mandating subjective standards like visitor experience "quality." The overlay of wilderness management on top of national park management does not eliminate the authorities and responsibilities of the NPS under the 1916 Organic Act. It does narrow the range of options that an NPS manager may call upon to provide the visitor experiences for that area while assuring that the resources present are conserved unimpaired. Without such active management, wild places will cease to exist.

Mr. Crumbo and other wilderness advocates have argued that current NPS management policy that continues to allow motor rafts on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon is illegal, since, they assert, management of *proposed* wilderness requires the area to be managed as if it were already statutorily designated. This arm-chair legal interpretation is wrong, and Mr. Crumbo, a former career NPS employee, should know better.

In fact, the correct legal standard for NPS management of proposed wilderness is that the agency must not allow any development or use that would render the area unqualified or unsuitable for possible future designation as wilderness by Congress. The *ephemeral* passage of a motorized raft down a river does not render the area unqualified for future designation as wilderness, even if there were not substantial precedents for leaving pre-existing motorboat use in statutory wilderness, which there are. Those who have argued to the NPS that its present policy of allowing motorized rafts on the river violates the law are just flat wrong.

### **Motors are Essential**

In order for Grand Canyon National Park to be managed by NPS professionals in compliance with applicable law, regulation, and policy, the National Park Service must make many hard decisions, few of which will please every constituency of the park. But the facts are that the continued use of motorized rafts on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon is necessary for the future good condition of the park and the provision of high quality visitor river experiences there. The benefits of motorized rafts on the river include:

- 1) having the flexibility to spread visitor use among the limited number of beach campsites, to both reduce resource impacts and off-river visitor contact between groups;
- 2) having the ability of one group to move quickly and quietly past another group on the river, thus reducing the impacts of inter-group contact;
- 3) being able to move from one popular off-river attraction site to another in the river corridor, when one is occupied; and
- 4) being able to provide a significantly higher number of river trip opportunities to a broader range of the public than would be the case without motors.

Without motors, the total user day level allowed on the river would have to be increased significantly in order to allow the same number of people down the river:

- *Oars only* means that each visitor requires many more nights to complete a trip through the canyon.
- *Oars-only* means that either the total number of visitors able to take a river trip would also have to be reduced, probably quite dramatically, if the current user day carrying capacity remains the same, or the total user day allocation must be increased significantly.
- *Oars-only* means traveling through the canyon in large, multi-group clusters, with groups unable to achieve separation because every raft is traveling at the same speed. Holding one group back to seek separation is not an option because it simply means letting another group that launched the next day catch up.
- *Oars only* means greater damage to park resources at campsites with more people crowding in, unable to move downriver to another site.
- *Oars-only* means a diminished quality of experience for everyone on the river, unless total use is substantially reduced from the present level.

### **Exceptions Make the Rule**

As Congress has considered wilderness legislation over the nearly four decades since the 1964 Act was passed, many wilderness advocates, including myself, have expressed concern about exceptions to “normal” or “standard” wilderness management provisions. At times, these concerns are warranted, as anti-wilderness forces have lobbied for language in wilderness bills that would have allowed all sorts of damaging activities, from mining and oil and gas drilling, to private recreational cabins, to new road construction. Some have also objected to motorboats where they are already in use, arguing that they are a violation of the Wilderness Act. But this is simply not true.

A quick look at the legislative history of numerous national park wilderness statutes, and of the Wilderness Act itself, should answer the question about motorboats in designated wilderness where established prior to an area’s designation. Section 4(d)(1) of the Wilderness Act recognized that pre-existing motorboat use in statutory wilderness would be grandfathered in as an acceptable use. Indeed, in every national park or national forest wilderness designated since 1964 where pre-existing recreational motorboat use was already established, Congress has allowed by law its continuation. For example, this is true in Everglades National Park on the 110-mile Wilderness Waterway (and elsewhere in that park’s wilderness area), on the wilderness waters of Glacier Bay National Park, on the volcanic caldera lake in Crater Lake National Park, and elsewhere.

Aside from the fact that the legislative precedent for continued motorboat use in statutory wilderness is well established in law and practice, the reality is that for a generally linear park like Grand Canyon, and most other popular recreational river parks, the river is

analogous in many important respects to such famous parkways as the Skyline Drive through Shenandoah National Park, the Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier National Park, and the Tioga Road across the high Sierra in Yosemite National Park. In each of these cases, these popular motor-roads are bordered, at their pavement's very edge, by statutory wilderness. These routes function as primary access arteries into the backcountry, and this is what should happen in the Grand Canyon.

### **The Elite**

In his *bqr* article, Mr. Crumbo disparages, and dismisses, the outfitters' clientele as elitist rich folks, and implies that they do not deserve to be in a real wilderness since they have not "earned" it through sweat and hard work. He notes that in a recent survey of outfitted river users, some fifty percent claimed an annual household family income of \$100,000 or more. Of course, simple math indicates that the other fifty percent must have an annual household family income of less than \$100,000, and many probably make substantially less than that.

Anti-environmental forces often disparage wilderness as the exclusive domain of the rich elite, so it is ironic that a wilderness advocate such as Mr. Crumbo would criticize users of de facto wilderness for their level of income. Kim, don't go there. Surely, many members of most national environmental groups, and certainly most of the members of The Wilderness Society Governing Council, are in a substantially higher income bracket than even the one you criticize.

In my view, income level does not define a wilderness lover, attitude does. When I seek a wilderness experience, I would not choose a river trip with a large group, nor seek the creature comforts that are provided on some trips, both outfitted and private. But I know that many park visitors who do choose these amenities have every right to be there and that they will have, for them, a powerful wilderness experience in the Grand Canyon.

### **The Colorado River Management Plan**

Completing a revised Colorado River Management Plan and separately updating the wilderness recommendation this time around should be a high priority for the NPS. To do so, I believe there are five basic assumptions that must be adopted.

First, all concerned should come to realize that the river experience is enhanced, and the park's resources are better conserved, with motors, while both the experience and the resource are diminished without. This is true unless you wish to cut the public's access to river trips very dramatically, perhaps by fifty percent or more.

Second, everyone should understand the differences between managing a statutory wilderness, having a wilderness state of mind, and providing the opportunity for a wilderness experience. Each is distinctly different, but too often wilderness advocates confuse their own concept of wilderness philosophy with the specific wilderness management provisions found in the law and regulation.

Some wilderness advocates have even gone so far as to suggest that people who have not sweated enough, or spent enough time to get there, do not deserve to have a wilderness experience. It is ridiculous to impose one concept of a wilderness experience held by a veteran wilderness user upon a novice backpacker or first-time river runner in the Grand Canyon, and to suggest that the latter cannot achieve a true wilderness experience by riding on a motorized raft through the park.

Wilderness management is completely different than wilderness experience. My 90-year old mother can have a perfectly wonderful wilderness experience on the accessible Limberlost Trail in Shenandoah National Park Wilderness that is every bit as significant to her personally as my own experience was to me in the Gates of the Arctic National Park Wilderness in Alaska. Every statutory wilderness is managed to the same standard, under the law, but the experience of them on an individual to individual basis is quite different – terrain is different, degree of difficulty is different, proximity to developed areas is different – but they are all still wilderness under the law.

Third, once you accept the fact that motors, albeit increasingly quiet and clean ones, are a permanent part of the management regime at Grand Canyon National Park, then the other array of issues – carrying capacity, user days and the allocation of them among competing groups, launch calendar, length of seasons, group size, etc. – can be readily, if not easily, addressed. Conversely, if the debate over motors continues to rage, then I would assert that these other issues cannot be resolved, simply because there are too many possible scenarios and variables to contemplate or forge into a final river plan.

Fourth, all parties must realize that the practical, everyday procedures for running the river, and the equipment needed to do so, have changed radically over the past twenty years. The proper standard of ethical user behavior on the river has vastly improved. Waste removal, cooking fire controls, fresh water usage, beach habitat protection, and Leave No Trace practices in the side canyons and at attraction sites have all rendered the quality of the Canyon's resources better than they were. This trend can certainly continue with the advent and implementation of zero emission, silent electric watercraft.

Finally, it is hopefully as clear to other wilderness lovers as it is to me that the strongest advocates for wild places are those who experience them firsthand. Surely the vast majority of folks who have taken a Grand Canyon river trip, whether a private or professionally-guided trip, either motorized or non-motorized, have come away with a new, or renewed commitment to support the national park system and the critical need to protect our special places across our great country. Surely, many have become members of groups like The Wilderness Society or the National Parks Conservation Association as a result.

It would be wrong for the long-term benefit of the park, and wrong for the growth and effectiveness of the park and wilderness advocacy groups, for the use of the river to be reduced dramatically below today's level. The only way to assure that the national parks will still be available for my grandchildren, and yours, is if there is a strong and growing constituency to speak for them. This constituency derives directly from the ability to

enjoy the parks to their fullest in a manner consistent with their unimpaired conservation in perpetuity.

**The Bottom Line**

I'm for statutory wilderness designation in Grand Canyon National Park. One million, one-hundred thousand acres of it. But not on the river, which should remain a non-wilderness linear corridor surrounded by the opportunity for solitude and tranquility envisioned by Howard Zahnizer when he wrote the beautiful words of the 1964 Wilderness Act. The resources of the park will be fully protected; the high quality of the visitor experience on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon will be fully protected. For once, both the resource and the visitor will win.

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