



## Motors, like private boaters, have place in Grand Canyon

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When it comes to oxymorons, "motorized wilderness" is near the top of the list.

And Exhibit A is the Grand Canyon.

While tour buses belch diesel fumes at the South Rim, tourist helicopters buzz overhead and rafts putt-putt their way down the Colorado, the Canyon remains in the popular imagination a last retreat from civilization and all its intrusions.

Something doesn't add up, and it starts with this country's conflicted vision for our national parks. The parks preserve our natural and cultural heritage, but usually for the purpose of mass tourism. In other words, our culture has assumed the right of access to its national treasures, even if that access alters the values that make those treasures worth preserving.

At Grand Canyon National Park, the latest skirmish between the preservationists and the mass recreationists is being fought over boating access on the Colorado River. So-called "private boaters" -- individuals and groups who want to run the river on their own -- are lobbying not only for more trips but an end to the motorized rafts used by the commercial outfitters.

Purists would say it's about time the Colorado was returned to a motorless state. We say that stance is not only ahistorical but unfair, although other parts of the private boaters' plan are well worth pursuing.

The key question in the Canyon, along with most other national parks, is how to balance human intrusions with the natural values that make the world's deepest and longest river canyon special.

The fact that the river flow is now controlled by a dam doesn't mean the setting is any less stunning or the need to protect the unique and fragile flora and fauna any less compelling. Motors aren't the issue -- a manmade noise doesn't necessarily negate wilderness values, whether it's mechanized or not. What's at issue is the ability of motors, when used on rafts, to ferry more people down the river in the same amount of time as can be carried on non-motorized boats, and the impacts those people have on beaches, plants, side streams and other parts of the Colorado River ecosystem.

The private boaters have made what we think is a good start at a plan that reduces those impacts by spreading out the rafting season and reducing the size of each party. In that way, there would be fewer people on any one stretch of the river on any given day. The tradeoff is that there would be boaters and rafters in the river corridor for a greater part of the year.

That seems like a fair compromise, especially if it means that private boaters will have more trips and thus not face the 20-year waiting lists that now exist.

But going cold turkey on motors doesn't seem necessary if all other impacts can be addressed by the proper spacing of trips and reduction in party size. If the Colorado River through the Canyon is going to be used for mass recreation (and more than 100,000 user days on the river certainly meets that definition), then it loses the claim to the kind of wilderness values that would prohibit motors.

That doesn't mean the noise should not be reduced as much as possible, and the commercial rafters have tried to comply by investing in quieter motors. They have also made great strides in minimizing their ecological impacts by packing out human waste from campsites and using only biodegradable soaps.

Motorized trips also provide greater convenience and access in a modern world of shorter vacations and older, more frail recreationists. Convenience and access shouldn't be the primary values governing any national park. But if they can be reasonably accommodated within the larger values of that park, they deserve consideration.

In the Grand Canyon, as in most every other national park in 21st-century America, mass access has meant some degree of motorized intrusion. If, for wilderness advocates, that seems as insupportable as being a little bit pregnant, we suggest that wilderness, unlike pregnancy is not an either-or condition. Wilderness is a value, and values change as society evolves. Motors, like private boaters, deserve a place on the Colorado, and we trust both sides will work to find enough common ground to make that happen.