

Raft rift

Congress should protect motorized trips through the Canyon

Jul. 19, 2003 12:00 AM

For more than three decades, the contentious debate over motors on rafting trips through the Grand Canyon has ricocheted off the majestic cliffs.

In many respects, the endless debate is like the canyon itself, where time seems to stand still.

It's time to break this impasse and leave the river corridor free of a wilderness designation, allowing a river management plan to finally take shape.

Let's face reality: The motorized outfitter industry provides a valuable service to the public.

For many, time constraints make the trip on a motorized raft the only option. Not many people can spend two weeks to take an oar trip along 250 miles of Canyon habitat - a sublime experience that has few equals.

Wilderness advocates contend a motorized trip is noisier. That's true. But the putt-putt of quieter and less-polluting four-stroke engines - a vast improvement over two-stroke models - doesn't cheapen what can be a spiritual and life-changing trip.

Most of Arizona's congressional delegation has asked President Bush to recommend that Congress remove the "potential wilderness" designation from the Colorado River's corridor.

The National Park Service recommended a wilderness designation in 1980 - a designation that if implemented would phase out motorized rafts in the Grand Canyon. But Congress saw the folly of shutting down an industry and squashed the idea.

The time is right to shut off the motors vs. no-motors debate.

The management plan for the Colorado River is being revised and will govern such things as river access, commercial and private trip allocations and rafting seasons.

Let's assume that the plan allows motors. That would conflict with the 1980 Park Service recommendation, setting up a legal battle and more delays.

Obviously, wilderness advocates oppose any presidential intervention. They argue that any intervention would undermine the planning process.

Not exactly. By resolving the motors issue, the way would be cleared for the planning process for the river to proceed.

The Grand Canyon is a treasured resource where the trick is to balance the wilderness experience and resource protection with access. The park belongs to everyone. It's not an elitist playground for only the strong, the rugged, the fit, the young.

Motorized outfitters provide access to one of the world's spectacular masterpieces. If motors are taken off the river, that access will be denied to many.

It's time for Congress to act.

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