LIVING RIVERS CURRENTS

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ELECTROSHOCK
In the Grand Canyon

Along with every watt of power extracted from the Colorado River at Glen Canyon Dam goes another piece of Grand Canyon's natural heritage. The hourly, daily and seasonal regulation of flows at the dam to accommodate variations in energy demand is one of the major variables causing habitat degradation in the nation's premier national park. Although scientists have been pushing for releases that mimic more the river's natural flow condition, those representing electrical utilities remain unconvinced. According to some, power interests are using their influence to impede efforts to reverse the decline of the Grand Canyon ecosystem.

Glen Canyon Dam powerplant:
Generating ecological collapse in Grand Canyon

"From the beginning, power users have had to be dragged into this kicking and screaming," said Dave Wegner, who headed up Glen Canyon Environmental Studies, forerunner of the Grand Canyon Monitoring and Research Center. "We lost two years alone navigating the hoops and hurdles they put in our way just to run our first test back in 1996."

Others working with the Adaptive Management Program now concur, citing a general pattern of objections to most proposals, dragging out decisions and delaying action whenever possible. "Meanwhile, the situation in the Canyon worsens," stated Nikolai Ramsey of the Grand Canyon Trust. "The latest studies show that humpback chub, an endangered fish, are in substantial decline."

"It's categorically untrue that power interests are obfuscating or impeding this process," said Clayton Palmer, with the Western Area Power Administration, the federal agency responsible for marketing power from Glen Canyon Dam. Palmer cited several examples where other agencies were unwilling to support proposals advanced by power interests. One, advocating large releases which might aid with preserving sediment in the Canyon, was opposed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service concerned about impacts on an endangered invertebrate, the Kanab ambersnail.

Palmer and other power proponents are quick to point out that they are indeed full partners, as nearly all the money used for Glen Canyon Dam Adaptive Management comes from hydropower revenues. "It's ludicrous that other government agencies and private foundations aren't helping us out," said Leslie James of Colorado River Energy Distributors Association. Such mitigation funds are, however, routinely tied to hydropower revenues.

James also argues that there is not yet enough science to determine if dam operations are the major problem. But a new report out for review this month by Grand Canyon Monitoring and Research Center indicated that dam operations are affecting not only native fish, but also the food web of the entire Canyon. Native biodiversity of the Grand Canyon's river ecosystem is on a downward spiral, largely the result of Glen Canyon Dam. The report recommends that dam operations mimic seasonal flows, not fluctuating flows. Utilities are concerned because this would cause a price increase for power from Glen Canyon Dam of about 21 percent, to about $21 per megawatt. This is still a bargain, costing only about half the price these utilities would pay should they choose to obtain power from other sources.

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GRAND CANYON CRISIS
LR Calls for Immediate Action

Ecologists have known for years that the operation of Glen Canyon Dam is causing negative impacts on the Colorado River ecosystem in Grand Canyon National Park. The Grand Canyon Protection Act was passed a decade ago to force action to reduce environmental damage downstream of the dam. Yet scientific data show the situation is worsening.

LIVING RIVERS and other groups are calling for an immediate overhaul of the dam management program set up by the Act. The program was established in 1996 following completion of an environmental impact statement on dam operations. A stakeholders group known as the Adaptive Management Work Group (AMWG) guides scientific research and management activities. According to Randy Peterson, Director of Adaptive Management Programs for the Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec), the AMWG has operated since 1997 with an annual budget of roughly $8 million. But many wonder if the AMWG is capable of making the necessary changes required to protect and restore the native ecosystem.

"The science shows that the program is failing," said David Haskell, retired Science Director of Grand Canyon National Park, and former AMWG representative for the Park Service. "The program has been extremely successful and effective, not in complying with the Grand Canyon Protection Act, but in demonstrating that as long as the dam continues to be operated for water and power needs, the ecosystem will continue to be degraded. Five years and forty million dollars have bought us the knowledge that nothing's improving."

In a letter delivered to the AMWG at its January meeting, LIVING RIVERS was joined by a number of groups in demanding action. Among the key concerns is the structure of the process that has accorded hydropower production equal importance to restoration of native habitat.

Colorado River through
Grand Canyon National Park

"Protecting native fish and other species is a higher priority than generating cheap hydropower," said David Sherman, a Sierra Club representative in Flagstaff. "Changes are needed now to get the adaptive management program on track and in compliance with the law."

LIVING RIVERS is seeking a supplemental environmental impact statement on dam operations to address the rapid decline of the river's ecosystem. The Grand Canyon Protection Act and other laws require agencies to protect the park's riverine environment, but the responsible federal agencies have failed to make progress toward this goal. Management has not benefited the endangered humpback chub. Non-native trout, on the other hand, thrive despite scientists' warnings that trout prey on native fish and compete for a limited food supply.

"Science shows that changes are needed, but those changes have not been implemented," said Dr. Robert Witzeman, of Maricopa Audubon Society in Phoenix. "There is resistance to doing what needs to be done."

LIVING RIVERS is also calling on the AMWG to recommend changes in dam operations to mimic natural, seasonal fluctuations in river flows, remove non-native fish, and reintroduce and recover endangered native fish. Scientists now openly wonder whether it is possible to adequately mitigate the impacts of Glen Canyon Dam. Decommissioning may prove to be the only option. Time is running out for the Grand Canyon, and hard choices must be made. LIVING RIVERS will continue to press for doing what's right for the river.

NATIVE FISH
Recovery or Rhetoric?

The freshwater fishes of the Colorado River watershed are among the most imperiled animals in the United States. In response to mandates of the Endangered Species Act, three endangered fish recovery programs have been implemented in the Colorado basin since 1988. Despite more than $100 million invested so far, these programs have generated few results. So this fall, the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) released a draft set of recovery goals which, if approved, would lower the federal standard by which these fish could be removed from the endangered species list.

LIVING RIVERS and several other groups were outraged, and submitted comments opposing the adoption of these weaker, and ecologically dangerous standards. The USFWS proposed to emphasize the use of hatchery fish to be dumped in depleted habitats. Success will be proclaimed by merely continuously restocking the area with a given number of hatchery fish to maintain an arbitrary population count. Emphasis will not be placed on habitat restoration to allow for self-reproducing populations.

"Species cannot be perpetuated without appropriate habitats, and an aquatic habitat cannot persist without some ecosystem order in its surroundings," said Dr. Joseph Shannon, an aquatic ecologist at Northern Arizona University. "The water and power interests control the flow of the Colorado River; ecosystem restoration and native fish recovery are not their priorities. I question if this is the sentiment of the majority of the public."

The state of Colorado is leading the charge to advance the weaker standards. Kent Holsinger, Assistant Director for Colorado's Division of Water Resources has stated that Colorado is committed to maximizing power generation to finance irrigation, and to diverting more water for development and industrial use. He has declared his state's intent to fight any federal regulations that may infringe on these objectives.

The prestigious Desert Fishes Council is also concerned, especially over the limited scientific input sought in the preparation of these new guidelines. This international society of academic, government and private organizations, adopted a resolution in November 2001, asking that the USFWS redraft the recovery goals based upon the results of a rigorous, independent, scientific review process.

But if Holsinger and others have their way, it may not be long before visitors to the Grand Canyon will see truckloads of hatchery-raised fish emptied into the Colorado river because agencies were unwilling to work to restore their habitat. Should this trend continue, the same approach could become commonplace with other endangered species—birds, mammals, reptiles—born in captivity and placed in unsuitable habitats to meet the objectives of the government's bean counters.

SILT HAPPENS
LR Forcing Agencies to Respond

The National Park Service is currently preparing a Development Concept Plan for Hite Marina on Lake Powell reservoir, despite the fact that sediment is about to fill the marina's bay. LIVING RIVERS is leading a coalition of environmental, river recreation and outfitter interests demanding that NPS immediately prepare a sediment management plan and associated environmental impact statement for the entire reservoir.

"There's no doubt this reservoir is filling with sediment," said Annie Payne, president of Colorado Plateau River Guides. "It's amazing that the government wants to pretend that it's not happening." Payne and other commercial river runners must deal with an increasing amount of sediment each year, as thousands of multi-day river trips on the San Juan River and Colorado River terminate at Lake Powell reservoir. "Most people think of this artifical lake as deep and clear, but for us river guides, it means travelling through miles of exposed sediment—mud, exotic weeds, and dust. This makes for a very unpleasant and sometimes dangerous experience for our customers."


© Bill Wolverton
Two mile-wide delta backing-up the San Juan

The sediment problem is already affecting Hite Marina, as it will the entire reservoir and dam eventually. In the coalition's nine-page submission to the National Park Service, LIVING RIVERS demanded that no more public funds be expended for infrastructure planning until, one, the public knows how long it will be before sediment renders existing and planned infrastructure useless, and two, immediate work is undertaken to improve access in the river corridors—prior to spending more money on temporary marina facilities.

A brief sediment study for the area surrounding the marina in question, revealed the reservoir's sediment delta will advance up to and beyond the marina in 2003. This will immediately render the marina useless in low water years, with access continuing to decline over time as the delta continues to expand.

Estimates for how long it will take sediment flows to reach the intake infrastructure for Glen Canyon Dam—forcing the dam's decommissioning—range from 50 to 150 years. But as noted in the submission, geologists point out that any number of factors could cause the large amounts of sediment building-up in the upper part of the watershed to mobilize and rapidly flow into Lake Powell, thus greatly accelerating the rate of siltation and hastening the arrival of the day when Lake Powell reservoir must be drained.

I WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

About the declining health of the Grand Canyon ecosystem.

Write to me, Gale Norton
Secretary of the Interior
1849 C St., NW, Washington, DC 20240

Should I:
- prepare a supplemental EIS for Glen Canyon Dam
- operate the dam to mimic natural river flows and temperatures
- support removal of non-native fish that prey on native species
- make endangered fish recovery a top priority for managers, and
- make hydropower production subservient to ecosystem management?

Please contact my friends at LIVING RIVERS *should you desire more information*

COLORADO RIVER WATER USERS MEETING
Environment Gains Recognition

Just a few short years ago the ecological and social values of the Colorado River delta were barely acknowledged. At this year's Colorado River Water Users Association (CRWUA) annual conference, nearly every speaker addressed the environmental issues of the delta, even though no advocacy group was invited to speak on its behalf. But we were there nonetheless. In the halls, business meetings and press briefing, LIVING RIVERS took every opportunity to advance the cause of the delta and other critical environmental and social issues not being addressed by agencies using and managing the Colorado River.


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LR's David Orr working the CRWUA faithful

Gilbert Sanchez of Tribal Environmental Watch Alliance told journalists during the LIVING RIVERS press briefing that "The cultural heritage of Indian people is threatened by water development projects. All this damage, and for what? Much of this water is stored just to evaporate into the sky. Ancestral gravesites should not be sacrificed for more golf courses, backyard swimming pools and hayfields in the desert."

Yamilett Carrillo-Guerrero, of ProNatura Sonora, a Mexican environmental protection group, echoed these concerns. "Local communities in the delta are ready to contribute with land and water to help restore the delta. For them, a river with water means life. In no way do they consider water nurturing the Colorado River delta wetlands and the Upper Gulf of California as wasted," said Ms. Carrillo-Guerrero.

LIVING RIVERS presented a letter to CRWUA's board on behalf of the binational coalition working for delta restoration, seeking a partnership with the association in working to move more water to the Colorado River delta. Although some members expressed opposition, the board did invite a formal presentation on the proposal for its spring meeting.

Pat Mulroy, Director of the Southern Nevada Water Authority, noted that water agencies indeed need to start paying attention. "Environmental responsibility is the job of every water manager," she said. "Those who are demanding to have their voices heard are not our traditional customers."

LIVING RIVERS *Currents* is published monthly by LIVING RIVERS. For information on our full range of river advocacy programs, or becoming a member, please give us a call or visit our website.

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