azcentral.com
ARIZONA'S HOME PAGE

Hedden: Canyon's preservation is worth every penny

*by **Bill Hedden** - Aug. 4, 2011 12:00 AM*
My turn

FLAGSTAFF -- When the gates of Glen Canyon Dam first closed in 1963, its federal managers operated the behemoth to produce the most money possible from the available flow of the Colorado River.

During the day, when they could make the most from selling electricity, they would send a gusher of water through the turbines, running them full blast. At night, when there was less demand for power and prices dropped, they would slow the flow of water to a trickle.

River runners in the Grand Canyon downstream learned to tie their boats far from the waterline so they wouldn't be floated away by the daily floods.

But maximizing revenues from hydropower exacted a heavy toll on the Canyon. The huge daytime flows washed away the beaches and shorelines used by recreationists and the animals and birds. Numerous archaeological sites lost supporting sediment and were exposed to ruin. And the rich collection of Colorado River native fish was catastrophically harmed, so that today they are the most endangered group of vertebrates in North America.

Within 30 short years it was obvious that something had to be done if the river in our greatest national park was going to be anything more than a sterile pipe running

sponsored the Grand Canyon Protection Act, which passed into law in 1992. The act requires that the dam be operated in a manner that protects and restores the national-park resources even if that means a reduction in hydropower revenues.

As McCain explained at the time, "The erratic release of water from the dam to meet peak electric-power demands [has] destroyed Colorado River beaches, and harmed other natural, cultural and recreational resources. Somewhere along the line, we forgot our obligation to the canyon and to the future generations for whom we hold it in trust."

To comply with the new law, starting in 1996, dam managers moderated the daily fluctuations, carving off the highs and lows to release more water and generate more power during off-peak electric demand and run less water through the turbines at peak periods. (None of this affects overall water deliveries through the dam.)

It's a wise tradeoff: We put less stress on the river system, although we give up some revenue from hydropower.

from the dam. So Senator John McCain co-

azcentral.com
ARIZONA'S HOME PAGE

But Arizona Rep. Paul Gosar wants to turn back the clock. He recently testified that "Glen Canyon Dam's hydropower generation has decreased by almost one-third . . . due to misguided environmental regulations . . . "

Misguided? Protecting Arizona's crown jewel is a smart long-term policy.

We need to do more, not less. The daily fluctuations in flows are still large. They may have slowed the damage to the river, but they definitely have not stopped it.

A 2005 U.S. Geological Survey report on the Colorado River concluded that nearly every resource of concern in the Grand Canyon had declined over the previous decade.

So how much more would it cost to really improve the Grand Canyon?

Most river scientists are in agreement that natural steady flows are best for improving Grand Canyon resources - building beaches, creating native fish habitat and supporting fragile cultural sites.

Well-known energy economist David Marcus concluded in a 2009 study that an optimal steady-flow regime would increase average residential electric bills between 1 cent and 10 cents per month.

That does not seem like a lot to pay for a restored Grand Canyon.

Bill Hedden is executive director of Grand Canyon Trust.