

## **Damn the Dam**

**By Dave Olson**

Once upon a time, there was a river, a river and a canyon. Everyone who saw this river in this canyon really liked it. Some lived for it, some died for it, many fought for it, no one hated it. Or admitted they did. All in all though, everyone agreed about its spectacularity. "Every one of these almost innumerable gorges is a world of beauty in itself.... Yet all these canyons unite to form one Grand Canyon, the most sublime spectacle on earth." This is what John Wesley Powell said about the Colorado River and the canyons it gave life to. The canyons Friar Francisco Garces described as "...the most profound canyons which ever onward continue." Powell and Garces knew the Colorado a long time ago; they explored area, an area that is now very different and yet changing even now.

Up until a few years back, people took care of the river, and it took care of them. A relationship that worked well until someone decided that the river could be better used running air conditioners and so they built a dam. No one noticed much then; it was back when few knew much about the wonders this area held. Anyway, there was more than enough of this hostile, rugged area to go around. Dams were built everywhere, lots of them. It was an easy fix for the energy junkies.

"Man has flung down a great barrier in the path of the turbulent Colorado," proclaimed the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation during the 1960's. "It has tamed the wild river-made it a servant to man's will." The bureau was boasting of Glen Canyon Dam, a 710-foot high monument to technological prowess, but it could have been talking about any dam in the country (Davis 26). Now, the cliffs, the canyons, the plants and birds and rocks and things, and the river is gone.

The Colorado is no longer there as it was. Such dams back up the Colorado that still flows relatively freely and make the canyon a sluiceway between dry hills (MacDougall 54).

So why do they do it? Why do they try? Electricity and water mostly. People generally need them. A lot of them. Too much? Any alternatives? Sure.

The flood gates should be opened, the river unleashed and the damage repaired. Let Nature reign again. Yee hah and Hieghty ho.

### **THE RIVER IN QUESTION**

Today the Colorado has been rightly compared to hundreds of miles of plumbing system (Sunset 104).

Peer into a gauge-filled control room of one of its big dams and you'll understand the B.L.M. official who stated, "The River's flow can be manipulated in the same fashion as the garden hose on the tap outside your home, and is" (Fradkin 81).

The Colorado has an importance out of proportion to its absolute flow (Stenger 53). Indeed few civilizations have asked so much from a body of water. And the question for the West is: Can the Colorado continue to meet these demands (Sunset 103).

A big river, but not that big, not big enough for all it is asked to do. In the early development of the country, it didn't play the part that rivers usually play. No one found riches on its banks, it wasn't a trade route, it didn't even go anywhere.

Lt. Joseph Ives said upon exploring the area in 1857, "Ours has been the first and doubtless will be the last party of whites to visit this profitless locality. It seems that the Colorado along the greater part of its lonely and majestic way shall be forever unvisited and undisturbed" (Sunset 95). Words very much lacking in accurate foresight but probably quite realistic at the time.

When San Diego flushes its toilets or Albuquerque turns up its air-conditioners the Colorado is involved. In fact it's involved in pretty much everything that happens in the southwestern United States. It waters the crops and lawns, lights the lights, quenches the thirsts, gives places to play and everything else in between.

The Colorado River is formed at the junction of what were the Grand and the Green. The Green River is larger than the Grand, but the Grand is now the Colorado. Including this river, the whole length of the stream is about 2,000 miles (Porter 18).

The series of mountain streams, which begin primarily in Wyoming and Colorado, is transformed into the giant extension cord which is the heart of the Canyonlands.

There was a time when, in my search for essences, I concluded that the canyonland desert had no heart. I was wrong. The canyonlands did have a heart, a living heart, and that heart was Glen Canyon and the wild Colorado (Abbey 64).

The Rio Colorado--the Red River--a river ten times as silty as the Nile, and seven times that of the muddy Mississippi. Too thick to drink, too thin to plow was the old adage used with the settlers.

As it curdles its way down the two-mile elevation drop (a definite advantage in sculpting) it shapes the land into knotted, twisted, fabled canyons that are the exquisite and unique trademarks of the basin area.

Then it stops.

First with Lake Powell.

Lake Powell, formed by the Glen Canyon Dam, is not a lake. It is a reservoir, with a constantly fluctuating water level--more like a bathtub that is never drained, than a true lake. As at Hoover (or Boulder) Dam, the sole purpose of this impounded water is to drive the turbines that generate electricity at the base of the dam (Abbey 65).

Then to the Grand Canyon. Of the Grand Canyon, what can one say? This is the Colorado's masterwork, and most attempts at description, no matter how eloquent, end up sounding futile... (Sunset 100).

As if the drowning of Glen Canyon wasn't enough, the river backs up again at Grand Wash Cliffs to create the ditch called Lake Mead. Hoover Dam is to dams what the Grand is to canyons. Man's monolith masterpiece compared with nature's. Some people like dams. They are big, they can make your head spin, they're easy to look at from the window of your Winnebago and there is pretty brochures to go along with them. Kind of like a cemetery.

I take a dim view of dams; I find it hard to learn to love cement; I am poorly impressed by concrete aggregates and statistics in cubic tons (Abbey 64).

Along the river there exists nine dams, and another fourteen on its tributaries. That's a lot of water and electricity. Some people want more.

More than 250 miles of white water flowing through a mile deep chasm will always be attractive to those in the business of impounding large bodies of freshwater and producing electrical energy (Carothers 75).

Three choices exist: more dams, leave it be or open the flood gates and resurrect the river.

Whatever the fare of the new dams, those that already exist will keep both engineers and environmentalists busy for the foreseeable future. The question now is not how to tame the rivers but how to keep them wild (Davis 33).

#### **QUESTIONS BUT NO ANSWERS**

Having thus seen Glen Canyon both before and after what we may fairly call its damnation, I feel that I am personally in a position to evaluate the transformation of the region caused by construction of the dam. I have had the unique opportunity to observe firsthand some of the differences between the environment of a free river and a power-plant reservoir (Abbey 64).

There are changes, big changes. A transformation happened and created a new environment.

By the turn of the century, the Bureau of Reclamation estimates that all of the available Colorado River will be in use. Certain unpredictable events--a renewed demand for oil shale, a large-scale assignment of water rights Indian Tribes would hasten that day. So might a prolonged drought...(Berkman 192).

The dams along the Colorado and tributaries provide a large portion of the power and water for about 30 million people. A growing population and yet a shrinking river. The population grows and no alternatives are looked at and conservation is minimal.

There are a lot of facts and figures, statistics and studies.

They all say that much of the area is filled with a lot of cubic acre feet of water which generates so many megawatts of power at peaking hours which are sold to utilities and public works, for rates contingent partially on the hour in relationship to the peaking hours and a certain amount of cubic feet per second of water running through how many turbines, while fluctuating the many trillion gallon lake. The reports and the situation is confusing. The numbers don't matter though as much as the alternatives that should be investigated and evaluated with a clear, unbiased mind.

The studies also say that although a multitude of species of fish and plants and birds and animals have become extinct in this area, it doesn't matter because they dump fish in now. Fish that are regularly ground up in turbines. They say they are working on it. The studies say that it's not hurting the downriver much. Maybe it doesn't matter that the beaches are washing away. Now, since dams have no environmental impact, Congress is constantly barraged with proposals for more. More dams and more turbines.

(Proposals) will be postponed until the water and energy demands of the Southwest are considered to outweigh the preservationist's arguments for maintaining the Grand Canyon Wilderness as it now exists (Carothers 76). Sources on Capital Hill say that the proposal has no widespread support at present, but "that could change if this country ever faces another Arab oil crunch" (MacDougall 54).

Lake Mead is old, the area thrashed, all but gone. Gone but not forgotten. Put an epitaph and leave it alone. Most others are new. Kill them before they grow. Lake Foul, the National Recreation Slum, lies in between. It rapes the most pristine of all locales and thus is a particular bone of contention.

The dirty, warm river fills the reservoir and passes through the dam clear and cold. Hmmm . . . Wonder where that silt went. Give it a hundred years and wallow in it. The beaches down river, the ones replenished by the silt aren't really there now. There is a long list of plants, fish, animals and the like which aren't there anymore. They aren't coming back. The amount of water is regulated by the amount of microwaves running in Beverly Hills and so the lake and river level raises and lowers in coordination with the need. This accounts for not only the fascinating "bath tub formation" but it destroys pretty much every shred of flora and fauna. That flora and fauna that won't be coming back. Besides whitewashing the canyon walls, the dam also created a lovely layer of algae in the chilly down river. Besides the birds, plants and wildlife, gone too

are the waterfalls, the beaches, the trees, the canyons, the warm, flowing river. All under the lake. There's statistics about all this. Terms too, technical ones and all. Lots of reports too. They don't matter. Things are dead.

But the recreation, it provides is so fun. Millions come every year to dig the scenery, spend some time outdoors, breathe some fresh air, get liquored up and piss in the lake, give del e. webb and the rest of the nature capitalist their filthy lucre, rage in circles in their turbo-mega charged speed demon boats to enjoy nature, bar-b-que their skin, take some poloroids and throw pennies of the dam (don't get caught though, big, big fine-jail sentence too)(should been a fine for dumping 40000000 quilliontons of cement and steel between the canyon walls).

Recreational benefits, while substantial were of secondary importance to those who build the dam (Abbey 65).

So when the floodgates are opened, and all the nature lovers leave, I suppose a lot of park rangers, busboys, liquor storeowners, tour bus drivers and river guides will be out of work. Gee, that's too bad. Send them to Las Vegas, lots of similar jobs there. Except for river runners and guides, but soon they will be out of business anyway. It all goes back to the cubic feet per second and all those statistics, the people are there to do it, but the river can't be run. Too much water, too little water, not enough water in some places, big waves coming down as the flow is regulated.

No one would claim that the dam should be operated according to the needs of the river runners. Nevertheless, the hundreds of thousands of people who have made the trip through the canyon have also come to care for the preservation of its environment, and their concerns will always be part of any controversy over changes in the dam (Carothers 83).

They have back-ups on the river now. Traffic jams on the god-forsaken river no one was to visit. All caused by the dam and Lake Powell.

Call me crazy, but it seems to me that J.W.Powell wouldn't want the stinking cesspool named for him. Taking his child and making it into Frankenstein. And who did it to him?

Who is this B.L.M.?

The Bureau of Reclamation is comfortably obscure, nestled in the Department of the Interior, insulated from too much Congressional scrutiny by the fact that it earned a good reputation in its early years of reclaiming arid lands, and protected too...From this political fastness, however, the B of R has bodied forth public works projects that have irreparably damaged the West's environment, systematically ignored Indians' rights to water, spent million's of taxpayer's on unneeded irrigation, hurt agriculture nationwide, and subsidized a few wealthy farmers to the tune of millions of dollars. From its most famous project, Hoover Dam, to its most ambitious proposal, a billion dollar Central Arizona Project that will serve no purpose, the Bureau has run from boondoggle to boondoggle, chanting the tired litany of "improving nature" (Berkman 1).

Whew... Well 'tis nice to see that the government is involved. Right? And they have control over my land, your land, no ones land.

OH, WHAT TO DO

Alternatives, there are plenty. Enough to satisfy the revolting excess and greed of electricity pits like Las Vegas? Solar, Cogeneration (poop burning) are the best. More efficiency in others would work as well. And not to get too crazy, a change in lifestyle, ideals, sensibilities and needs of the country would work quite nicely.

It will take a while, but long before it becomes a solid mass of mud Lake Powell (jewel of the Colorado) will enjoy a passing fame as the biggest sewage lagoon in the American Southwest (Abbey 69).

Or we could have a gigantic cement and steel monument with a golden, living river flowing underneath that future generations will look at, nod their heads and laugh at our folly. Ha, ha, ha.

Some People say we need the power, the water, the plan won't work. Other people try to blow it up or otherwise rid the world of this large brick which would destroy us. They call these people radicals and crazy. Most don't know and don't care. They should.

"... we can shut down the Glen Canyon power plant, open the diversion tunnels, and drain the reservoir. This will no doubt expose a drear and hideous scene: immense mud flats and whole plateaus of sodden garbage strewn with dead trees, sunken boats, the skeletons of cattle and long-forgotten hatchery-bass fishermen. But to those who find the prospect too appalling I say, give Nature a

little time. In five years, at most ten, the sun and wind and storms will cleanse and sterilize the repellant mess. The inevitable floods will soon remove all that does not belong within the canyons...Within a generation-thirty years- I predict the river and canyons will bear a decent resemblance to their former selves. Within the lifetime of our children Glen Canyon and the living river, heart of the canyonlands, will be restored to us. The wilderness will again belong to the people (Abbey 69).

I can hardly wait. Yee hah and Hieghty ho!

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