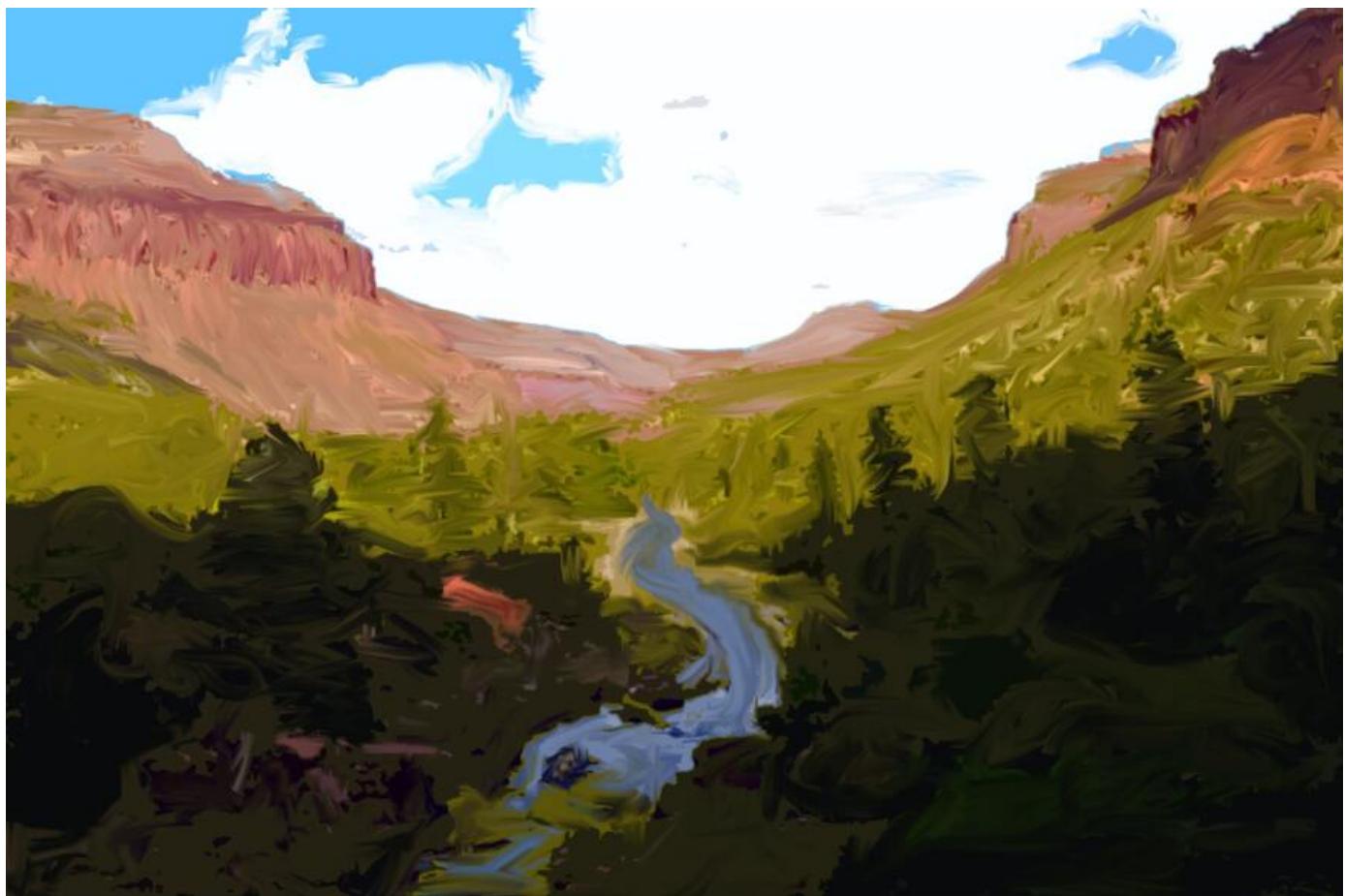


The Land Desk: Memories of the River of Sorrow



Jonathan's note to readers:

This is an essay about the beleaguered Dolores River in southwestern Colorado and a boat trip I took on it years ago, when dam operators released enough water from McPhee Reservoir each spring to support downstream boating and the riparian ecosystem. The occasion: Sen. Michael Bennet is expected to introduce legislation later this year establishing a national conservation area on a 60 mile stretch of the river below McPhee Dam.

On the morning of May 29, 1998, three friends of mine launched a canoe, a kayak, and a raft from the Bradfield Ranch put in along the Dolores River below McPhee Dam on a three day tour. I, the only non-pro boater in the group, tagged along for the ride. The trip would turn out to be fairly typical for the lower Dolores, which is to say it was incredible, beautiful, at times terrifying, and served as a salve for wounded psyches. I mean, there was the thing with the coffee ... well, I'll get to that ... but otherwise the trip was extraordinary in large part due to its timing.

We began our journey on an infamous day in Four Corners Country history, oblivious to the bloody mayhem unfolding within a dozen or so miles from where we were. That was mere coincidence. More significantly, we were experiencing what would turn out to be one of the last bountiful boating years on the lower Dolores. Within a couple of years climate change-induced drought would set into the San Juan Mountains, lake levels would plummet, and the big spigot on McPhee Dam would be virtually shut off more years than not, rendering boat trips like ours impossible. And just over a couple of decades later, the stretch we floated would be reduced to a series of deep puddles, downstream river gauges would flatline for weeks on end, and the future existence of the once mighty River of our Lady of Sorrows would be thrown into doubt.

We weren't cognizant of any of that, though. All we knew is

that we'd managed to get a few days off from our respective jobs and that we were slipping onto the river before that year's generous releases from the dam had ebbed for the summer.

God knows I needed it. I was living in Silverton then, running a little bakery with Wendy, and gearing up for the tourist season to come while still reeling from my father's death earlier that spring. So when G called me up and invited me on a trip down the Dolores, where I had spent a lot of time with my father, albeit none of it in a boat, Wendy pretty much pushed me out the door. I met G, who was living up in Pitkin County at the time, in Ouray. We drove through the Disappointment Valley in the last light of dusk and camped out near Slick Rock so we'd be in position to do the shuttle first thing in the morning.

We launched on one of those outrageously perfect, blue-sky-warm Four Corners days. The river was running at the 1,300 cubic feet per second, which was about half of what it had been a couple weeks earlier, but plenty to push us along at a rapid but conversational clip. We weren't in a hurry, but we also didn't want to dally since it was Friday and the crowds likely would be out looking to get in one more float before the season ended, and we wanted first dibs on the prime campsites.

"Hey! Did you hear about the bank robbers? Heavily-armed fugitives.

They think they're down here somewhere!"

We talked about the things people talk about when floating down an iconic Western river, which is to say not much of consequence. Well, all of us except B, that is, who yammered on in his deep, gravelly voice about the coffee he had brought back from a recent trip to Guatemala. He had packed a pound of the black gold in our food box. "You've never had coffee like this, Jonny. You just wait!" He talked it up so much that I almost begged them to pull over, set up the kitchen, and brew me up a pot in the middle of the day—but I figured that might violate some code of the river so I kept my trap shut.

In the middle of the afternoon, somewhere deep in the Ponderosa Gorge, we eddied out at a big flat spot in a glade of butterscotch-scented, girthy pines—an ideal river campsite. B had let me try out his canoe, which was a little bit scary and tough on the knees, besides, so I was somewhat relieved to be done for the day and ached for a beer and to just laze around in the sun before it disappeared behind the rim. As we were de-rigging the raft and setting up camp another party of paddlers floated by.

"Hey!" One of them said, "Did you hear about the bank robbers?"

"Bank robbers?" B yelled. "What bank robbers?" But that kayaker was already out of earshot, leaving the next guy to answer: "Heavily armed fugitives. They think they're down here somewhere!" The rest of his words were lost in the wind.

"Did he say something about a cop getting shot?" I asked. Everyone just shrugged their shoulders and kept setting up camp. "Did you say something ...?" I yelled, before realizing that guy couldn't hear me either. "He said something about a cop getting shot. And about them coming down here, didn't he?"

"Ahhh, nothing to worry about," D said. "Have a beer."

I took a big, cold, sudsy swig. It wasn't enough to dull my anxiety, though. I was already mildly terrified of the gnarly rapids that lay ahead—I'm not a water person and I'm really not a churning-, hypothermia-inducing-whitewater person. Now I had something else to freak out about: gunned-up maniacs invading our camp, stealing our coffee even before I had a chance to sample it, and taking us hostage—or worse.

I took another swig, and then another, warily watching the rim.



The Dolores, by my reckoning, is actually two distinct rivers. The first begins high among the San Miguel and Rico ranges, tumbles recklessly down past the town of Rico—where it picks up acid mine drainage chock full of dissolved metals—and continues at a mellower pace through pastures and meadows lined with aspen and spruce and fir, meets up with its Western fork, and continues southward. This Dolores River runs parallel to its sisters—the Mancos, the La Plata, the Animas—and like them appears to be destined to meet up with the San Juan River to the south.

But just below the town of Dolores, the river's path abruptly veers in a northward direction in defiance of common sense and topography. Rather than take the 40-mile-long path of

least resistance to the San Juan, the Dolores carves a convoluted route five times that length through high plateaus and uplifts and cuts paradoxically—i.e. perpendicularly—through a valley.

Geologists have theories about this wonkiness. One is that, tens of millions of years ago, the Dolores River continued on its southward path to the San Juan, possibly via McElmo Canyon, but was diverted onto its present course when the Ute Mountain laccolith bubbled up from the earth, lifting the surrounding lands. Another is that the San Juan River once ran north of its present path—just south of Durango and through Mancos—and then turned northward, met up with the Dolores River near the town of Dolores, and continued more or less along the Lower Dolores River's current route, carving the deep gorges along the way. Then, some 30 million years ago, the La Plata Mountains lifted upward, pushing the San Juan onto a new path and leaving the Dolores to flow alone through the ancestral route.

In any event, it is here, at the big bend, where the second Dolores River begins, the iconic, wind-through-sandstone, beleaguered, classic, desert, imperiled stream. And it is here, where the river changes direction, that the river really starts to live up to the sorrowful name given by Spanish explorers: El Rio de Nuestra Señora de Dolores.

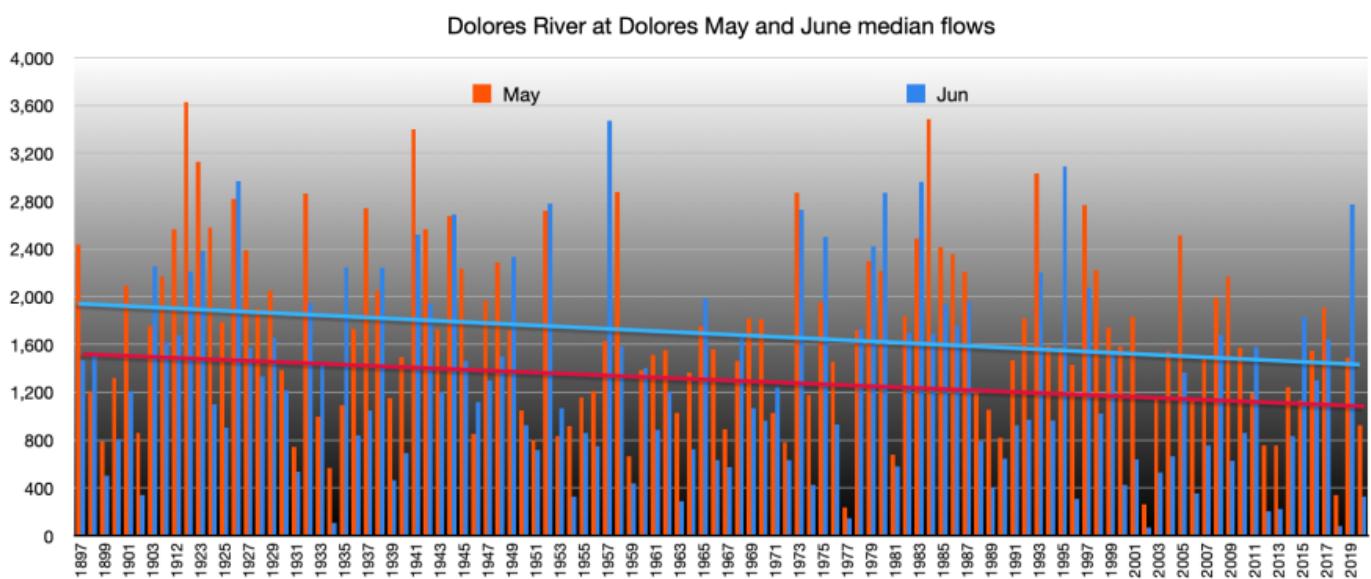
And it was here, 50 years and two weeks before I stood on the

beach counting the ways the canyon could kill me, that southwest river-running pioneer Otis “Doc” Marston, his wife Margaret, friends Becky and Preston Walker, and Ditty the dog embarked on the first recorded run—by white folks, at least—of the entire 200 or so miles of the lower Dolores in a small, snub-nosed, open cockpit “San Juan style” boat.

In May 1948, in the first miles after they launched—a stretch now inundated by the dwindling waters of McPhee Reservoir—Marston and company ducked under barbwire fence strung across the current, floated past the buried remains of ancient villages and the not so ancient town of McPhee, where the sawmill had closed just two years earlier, and delighted in a “yellow carpet of dandelions.” They passed the Great Cut Dike where, for more than a half century by then, the Montezuma Valley Irrigation Company had been diverting Dolores River water into a system of canals, reservoirs, laterals, and ditches to irrigate fields around Cortez.

Most likely Marston didn’t even notice the diversion. Runoff was abundant that spring, thanks to big winter snows, and the diversions probably amounted to no more than 10 percent of the total flow, leaving plenty of water in the river to carry boats at a fast clip. But by August the diversions would pilfer nearly every drop of the river’s ebbing flows—a phenomenon that would persist for decades to come. Many Western rivers lose a lot of their flows to irrigation, but in most instances some of

the water makes its way back to the river after running off of fields. In the case of the Dolores, however, the diverted water continues southward, the leftovers ultimately ending up in the San Juan River. You might call it a trans-basin diversion or, perhaps, an effort to return the river to its ancestral path. Either way it kills the flow of the lower Dolores for three or four months every year, forever altering its character and ecosystem.



Spring runoff on the Dolores River at Dolores—the dividing point between the upper and lower stretches—is prone to wild fluctuations from year to year. As the trendlines show, however, both May and June flows have declined since measurements began in 1897. 1977, 2002, and 2018 were the driest years so far.

On night two the Marston party stopped at a “fine sandy beach camp with plenty of drift,” probably pretty close to where my friends and I would make our first night’s camp a half century later. “Dinner of a big salad and canned plums,” Marston wrote of that night in Colorado Magazine a year after the trip. “Ditty was a very tired dog. The water has the

appearance of 2,000 to 3,000 sec ft." The next morning Marston noticed the river had risen by some 10 inches, as the unregulated flows fluctuated wildly in tune with mountain temperature variations.

Our camp was fine, as well, and after a dinner of something more substantial than plums and salad—and more talk about that damned Guatemalan coffee—I hit the hay, gazing up at the gnarled branches of a ponderosa silhouetted against a vast river of stars. I attempted to reason away my fear of the enigmatic fugitives or bank robbers or whatever they were, telling myself they couldn't and wouldn't make it into the Ponderosa Gorge, and even if they did, any attempt to cross the churning, icy waters of the river would kill them.

I awoke at the baking hour, which is to say in the pre-dawn, far earlier than my companions, jonesing for a cup of joe. While I waited for my friends to get their non-baker asses out of bed and fire up the kitchen, I wandered up a side canyon. I froze, my heart racing, when I detected movement up ahead, surely coming from either a mountain lion or a violent fugitive. I wasn't eager for either type of encounter without caffeine in my system, so I scurried back to camp and quietly tinkered with the coffee making apparatus instead, firing up the stove, putting the water on, and digging out B's fabled Guatemalan grounds. I opened the brown, oily paper bag and inhaled the aroma, my salivary glands kicking into overdrive at

anticipation. But as I started to scoop a generous helping of grounds into the pot, my sluggish brain detected a problem—a really big problem: B had brought whole beans, not grounds, and nothing to grind them with.

And so it was that, a good half hour later, my friends found me down by the water using a rounded, river-polished rock to smash coffee beans against a large, flat piece of sandstone in order to satisfy my caffeine addiction and theirs.

We were now on a similar schedule, offset by five decades, as Marston and company. They had pancakes for breakfast, we had bacon and eggs and artisan-style, stone-ground Guatemalan coffee. Then we all got back onto the river and within an hour or two were in the midst of yet another odd kink in the river's path: A left hairpin turn followed by a sharp jig to the right serving as the entrance to the Dolores River Canyon. Once again geologists try to explain this zany deviance away with ancestral rivers and some such. And once again I'm not sure I buy it. Not that they care what I think.

Here the river cuts a deep gash through the calico quilt of Dove Creek bean and sunflower and alfalfa fields on one side, and a high conifer-covered plateau on the other. The canyon walls are made up of a series of burnished orange-red, desert-varnished sandstone terraces, topped with leaning ponderosas and cacti and juniper. At some places the rim is 2,000 feet above the river bed. The current picks up speed

here and the riffles become rapids. On the rare sections of flat water I was able to look up at the walls, at a red tail hawk floating in the blue, at a glint way up on the rim like sun reflected from metal or glass. A fugitive looking for an escape route? A sniper looking for a fugitive? A helicopter flew slowly down the canyon, seemingly scrutinizing us.

"Heavy washes from steep gullies on the canyon walls had washed room-sized boulders into the river and we had some fancy water work," wrote Marston. Then they saw "lively spouts" up ahead and pulled over to scout: "A half mile of rapids and all rocks with a drop close to 20 feet. A rapid-happy riverman in a cataract boat and a covered cockpit might run it, but he would need to be very happy." Instead, they "lined" the rapid, which they would dub "Old Snaggle Tooth" for the boat-splintering boulder that jutted from the current below the main wave train.

As we approached Snaggletooth ourselves, I considered proposing we re-enact history and do some lining ourselves, perhaps while I stood on shore observing the endeavor. I did not voice my thoughts, however, and it soon became clear that my friends had no intention of letting me off the Snaggletooth hook. The anxiety built.

I'm a desert rat, not a river rat. I've boated some iconic stretches, sure—the upper and lower San Juan, Westwater. I even did the Grand Canyon, spending all three weeks in a

quasi-panic attack that could only be dulled by liver-hardening quantities of alcohol. That's because water scares me, and water under the influence of gravity scares me even more. I have nightmares of getting dragged under and pummeled by rapids and avalanches and the undertow. And while Lava Falls and Skull and Crystal terrify me, Snaggletooth on the Dolores holds a special place in my internal room of fear.

One spring, back before the dam, my family went camping down in the Dolores River Canyon, chiefly so that my father could take photos of people rafting the big water. I'm guessing it was 1979, the year before construction began on McPhee Dam, and a huge water year. That winter, snow had piled up several feet deep in Durango, yes Durango, spurring snow days at school and giving us kids plenty of raw material to sculpture into thick-walled snow forts that could withstand even the ice balls hurled with tremendous force by the big neighborhood kids. The snow plows left towering piles of the stuff on the street corners into which we'd burrow elaborate rooms—although we never got up the nerve to spend the night in one. The crazy thing is that wasn't even totally anomalous at the time—after the devastating 1977 drought, which looks like the normal these days, snowfall was abundant in the Four Corners for a dozen consecutive years, so much so that Glen Canyon Dam nearly overflowed in 1983.



Mark Duggan

The Dolores River at Gateway, Colorado was a tepid trickle on July 17, 2021.

All that snow—1979's flows were about the same as in 1948, when Marston made his trip—made for a huge spring runoff and an especially menacing Snaggletooth. We watched as one after another boat and their passengers got pummeled yet barely made it through. Then, in the afternoon, after the sun had slipped behind the canyon wall and the temperatures fell, a raft with a handful of people came rushing downstream and into the hole, their boat getting wrapped around a big rock and then squashed by the powerful current. The passengers scrambled onto the rock, but the raft broke free and headed

downstream at the same time. They huddled together, wet and cold and trapped by the churning icy waters all around, and looked imploringly at those of us on shore.

Maybe the people were rescued, maybe not. All I remember is the pitiful and fearful looks on their faces, something I will always associate with Snaggletooth and, really, river running in general.

We stood on the shore looking out at the rushing water, yelling to make ourselves heard over Old Snaggle Tooth's roar.

"Hey, Jonny, you know what to do if you end up in the water, right?" D yelled.

"Umm, yeah. I point my feet downstream and float until I get rescued?"

Eye rolls all around.

"No, you dummy! You'll get washed all the way down to Bedrock before anyone can pull you out and you'll be dead way before that. Do you know how cold that water is? If—when—you flip, swim your ass off for the shore. And don't stand up in the current. You could get your leg torn off."

"Thanks for the reassurance," I thought, as we walked back to the boats to throw our lives at the mercy of the water.

Marston and company developed a novel technique for rapid-running. Preston Walker would stand on the little boat's stern whence he had a clear view of the rocks and waves ahead and call out directions to Marston, the oarsman. As one might expect, Walker was tossed into the drink on at least one occasion, sans life jacket. In Marston's endnotes of his account, he writes: "We had one life preserver, but the water would have justified more." Ya think? I chose not to reenact that foolishness and strapped my big orange life jacket on tightly and sat firmly on my bum with a death grip on a strap hooked to the front of the boat. The only instructions I shouted were, "Watch out for that wave! Don't flip! We're gonna die!!!"

We didn't. Flip, I mean, or die. G's raft driving skills got us through the interminable rapid and wave-train that followed without incident and the current carried us quickly around the big bend to a sandy beach and perfect campsite. It took me a moment to recognize the place, but then it all came flooding back. This was my family's favorite Dolores Canyon campsite when I was a kid.

Although we came down once, maybe twice, to watch the spring river runs, usually we made the bumpy drive to the Dolores Canyon later in the summer, after the irrigators had purloined all of the river's flow miles upstream. By late July or early August Snaggletooth was unrecognizable, a skeleton of a rapid, a jumble of massive boulders perched along a dry

riverbed. Try as I might, I could not reconcile the dry version with the dangerous, water-covered one. Downstream, the rushing waters of spring had eaten down into the bedrock to leave deep pools that remained even when the current dried up. They were cool and so deep I couldn't see the bottom, no matter how hard I peered into the glassy murk.

Usually we made the perilous drive high above the river and back down to the sandy beach where my friends and I found ourselves years later. The campsite and pool always seemed out of place to me. I guess it must have been the sandy beach, or the bottomless, still pool, or the thickly vegetated riverbank, shaded by the foliage of boxelder trees and willows.

My friends and I sat on the beach and drank beer and chatted lightly about the fugitives who apparently were still on the loose somewhere. We hadn't gleaned any more details—for all we knew they were just some bank robbers running from the law—and thus were still oblivious to the horrors that had played out in the outside world while we were immersed in the world of the gorge, the river, the beach. We probably talked about where we might hole up if we were fugitives, and I imagine I probably said I'd hole up right where we were, on the banks of the Dolores, deep in a canyon, where—with sage and ponderosa and sandstone and sky as my companions—I'd be alone but never lonely.

As the last of the light slipped over the canyon walls high

overhead, it brought out scars inflicted by an industrial sort of violence. The Dolores slices through the Uravan uranium belt, one of the nation's most uranium-rich regions. Soon after Marston and friends came around the big bend, they heard the sharp report of dynamite and saw, high up on the south rim where I was looking, a cloud of dust emanating from a uranium mining operation. During their 1948 trip they encountered prospect holes, mining detritus, an inactive mill, and tributaries running thick with ochre-tinted silt. The uranium mining industry faltered in the mid-1980s, but the wounds remain in the form of roads spiderwebbing mesa tops and unreclaimed mines, and as radioactive material lurking in the beds of rivers and the bottom of Lake Powell.

Despite the fact that irrigators diverted the entirety of the Dolores River's summer flows into their canals, it often wasn't enough to flood their hayfields into September so they could get a third or fourth cutting or to bring crops such as corn to maturity. And there wasn't nearly enough water to go around to all of the arable land in the area, meaning Dove Creek-area farmers were limited to dryland crops. And so, in 1968, U.S. Rep. Wayne Aspinall, a Democrat from Colorado's Western Slope, pushed through the Colorado River Basin Project Act, authorizing the construction of five water projects including the Dolores Project/McPhee Dam and an early form of the

Animas-La Plata project that included a dam on the Animas above Silverton.

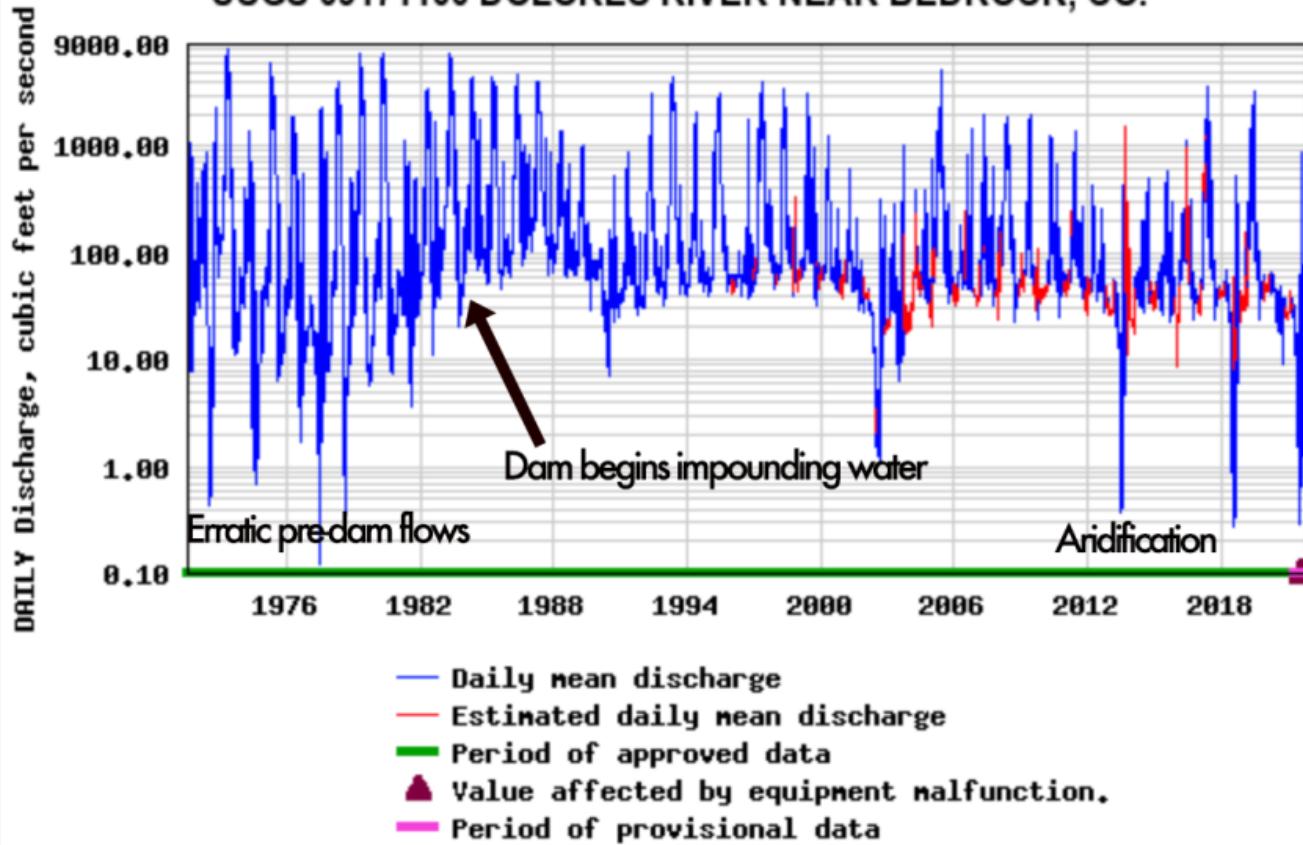
The intensification of the Vietnam War postponed the dam-building frenzy. When Aspinall was voted out of office in 1972, the effort lost a bit more steam. The A-LP project was eventually dropped from the list (later to be revived). And the Dolores Project seemed to be the next to go when President Jimmy Carter included it on his “hit list” of water projects he thought didn’t deserve funding, to the delight of environmentalists fighting to keep the river wild. Meanwhile, in order to stave off further abuse, the lower Dolores River corridor was nominated for Wild and Scenic River status, which would have prohibited mining and oil and gas leasing, while also ensuring enough water would be left in the stream to keep the river “wild and scenic,” which is to say a lot more water than zero, which was the lower river’s flow from mid-summer into fall.

Local farmers threw their considerable political heft behind the dam—and against the Wild and Scenic designation. They had a powerful ally: The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, which would receive a portion of the vast amounts of water to which they were entitled from the Dolores Project. With the help of Sen. Gary Hart, a Colorado Democrat, and driven by the pitbull-esque efforts of local water buffalo Sam Maynes, Carter’s resistance was overcome and the project was authorized.

Construction of McPhee Dam began in 1979 and the reservoir began filling in 1983.

The dam didn't kill the river—not right away, at least. Rather it was like putting the river's manic-depressive flows on lithium. The massive spring runoffs (by the time Marston reached the Colorado River, the Dolores was running at a monstrous 11,000 cfs) were tempered, but enough water still flowed downstream to scour beaches and preserve Snaggletooth's whitewater snarl. And for the first time in a century the lower Dolores didn't run dry in July. In fact, the year-round flows were enough to build and sustain a cold-water fishery for trout in the first dozen or so miles below the dam and a habitat for native fish below that. The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe got both drinking water from the project as well as enough to irrigate a major agricultural enterprise near the toe of Ute Mountain, providing much needed economic development. The Town of Dove Creek receives water from the project as do the formerly dryland farmers, allowing them to diversify their crops. In some ways, and contrary to opponents' fears, the dam had set the stage for a win-win-win situation.

USGS 09171100 DOLORES RIVER NEAR BEDROCK, CO.

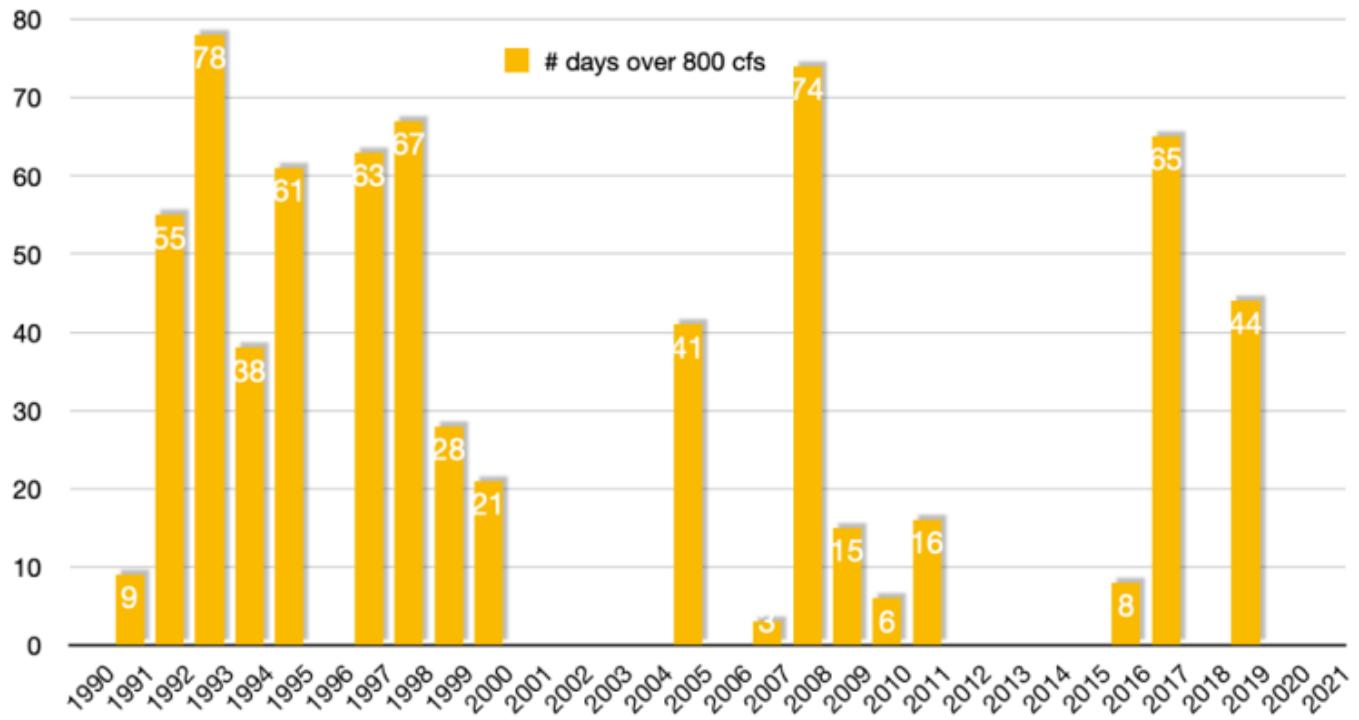


River flows at Bedrock show how the dam evened out the wildly fluctuating pre-dam flows on the lower Dolores, initially lowering the peaks but also keeping late summer flows at fish-sustaining levels.

Or so it seemed. The first hint of trouble came in the spring of 1990, when a dry winter prompted dam operators to release just 20 cubic feet per second into the lower Dolores. It was only barely better than nothing as far as fish were concerned and there was no boating nor enough flow to clean the riverbanks of tamarisk and Russian olive seedlings. River advocates rallied and began pushing for a new water management system to avoid a repeat. But ample winters returned and most years the river continued to flow. My friends and I had a lot less water than Marston during our trip,

but plenty of water for rafting and flows continued to be fish-sustaining for the rest of that year.

We now know that the 1980s were an exceptionally wet decade in the Four Corners and that 1990 was a harbinger of the new, increasingly arid normal. Not long after I ran the Dolores, drought, then megadrought, then climate change-induced aridification set in, the upper Dolores River's flows shrank, depleting McPhee Reservoir along with them. There simply isn't enough water in the river to go around anymore, even with the reservoir holding back spring runoff. As is the case with the entire [Colorado River system](#), the Dolores River's waters are over-allocated, but to a much greater extent.



Number of days the Dolores River's flows were 800 cubic feet per second—making it boatable—or higher at the Slickrock gauge.

During dry years all of the Dolores River water users lose something. Water in ditches is reduced, forcing farmers to fallow some or all of their fields, and sometimes the flows are cut off altogether come July or early August. The lower Dolores River is often the biggest loser, with minimal amounts of water released from the dam. The crisis climaxed in 2021 as the effects of two decades of dryness accumulated. The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe [received only about 10 percent of its usual irrigation water](#), forcing it to fallow fields; the Town of Dove Creek faced the prospect of losing its drinking water supply altogether; and releases from the dam for the lower river were cut to 10 cubic feet per second, a mere trickle. For several consecutive weeks in June and July the river gauge at Slickrock registered zero. Fish have died off, boating has been nearly non-existent most years, and the dearth of high spring water has allowed tamarisk and Russian olive to proliferate.



McPhee Reservoir in October 2019 and October 2021.

River lovers have stepped in to do what they can with tamarisk eradication campaigns and riparian restoration efforts. And,

after it became clear that new Wild and Scenic pushes in 2007 and 2013 couldn't get past political hurdles, stakeholders came together to work on a compromise, resulting in a proposal to create a national conservation area on 60 miles of river corridor below the dam, which would withdraw the land from new mining claims and oil and gas leases, bring more attention to the plight of this sorrowful and spectacular river, and possibly more funding to river restoration efforts. But it would do nothing to bring more water back to the river, and it would leave another 100 miles of the lower Dolores unprotected, in part because Mesa County commissioners withdrew support based on unfounded fears of losing their water.

Maybe this winter will bring temporary relief in the form of massive, reservoir-filling snowfall. But in these climate changed, warmer and drier world, it seems unlikely, and anything less than a series of unusually huge winters won't do enough to pull the river out of calamity. Clearly something has to give if the lower Dolores is to continue being a river: [Alfalfa](#) farmers need to switch to less water-intensive crops, like pinto beans; ditches will have to be lined and piped to reduce leakage and irrigation (as much as it breaks my heart to lose the ditch-side ecosystems leakage provides); and farmers will have to accept less water and become more efficient. Getting any of that to happen won't be easy.

My friends and I spent the final stretch of our 1998 trip drifting at a leisurely pace, letting the current pull us along and watching the canyon walls for signs of bighorn sheep or alcoves containing ancient dwellings. We were blissfully oblivious, both of the outside world and the happenings at that moment, and of the future of the river on which we floated —a river that has almost ceased to be a river at all. And we had no idea whatsoever that one day the opportunity to float the lower Dolores might dry up altogether.

POSTSCRIPT

As we pulled into the Slickrock takeout, we were confronted by a circus. A news helicopter landed just as we dragged the raft up to shore, and B, always the ham, approached the cameras asking: "Do the bank robbers look kind of like us?" Maybe a reporter asked us a question or two. If so, I imagine we looked a bit like deer in the headlights who didn't understand what they were talking about. Things just got stranger on the drive home. Just outside Egnar we topped a hill and encountered a roadblock, manned by jittery sheriff deputies that looked no older than 18, their rifles aimed directly at our heads. After some questioning and a cursory search of the gear, they let us pass.

We flipped through the radio. Every station had pre-empted regular programming to talk about the fugitives. Two men from Durango and one from Dove Creek had stolen a water truck

from the gas patch near Ignacio, Colorado. Their motive was (and remains) unclear: Some people think they may have wanted to use it to rob the vault at the Ute Mountain Ute casino; others that they were planning to build a bomb to blow up a dam or something else. When they got pulled over outside of Cortez the three got out of the truck and, with automatic weapons, riddled the car and the Colorado State Trooper with bullets, killing him.

They abandoned the water truck, stole a flatbed pickup, and led law enforcement on a lengthy pursuit during which they shot and wounded more cops before ditching the truck near Cahone, not far from where we had put onto the river, thus launching the largest manhunt in Four Corners Country history.

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KSUT publishes selected articles from [The Land Desk](#), a newsletter from Jonathan P. Thompson. Articles are archived here.

The Land Desk explores news from the Four Corners, Colorado Plateau, and Native and Indigenous lands.

Jonathan is a longtime Four Corners-based journalist and author of River of Lost Souls, Behind the Slickrock Curtain, and his new book, Sagebrush Empire.