

New film chronicles environmental 'outlaw' Ken Sleight's fight to restore Glen Canyon

"The Unfinished Fight of Seldom Seen Sleight" will be screened for free online Tuesday.



(Courtesy of the Ken Sleight Collection) Ken Sleight and Tim DeChristopher met while DeChristopher was being tried for protesting oil leases near Arches National Park in 2010.

San Juan County • When river runner, wilderness guide and legendary environmental provocateur Ken Sleight tells his life story, he likes to start at

the beginning.

"I'm a farm boy from Paris," he often says. "Paris, Idaho."

Sleight grew up in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but when he uses words like "temples," "paradise" or "heaven" now, at the age of 91, it refers to an earthly fold of the Colorado Plateau, a place he first visited in 1955, named Glen Canyon.

As one of the few commercial outfitters to guide rafts through Glen Canyon prior to its submersion under Lake Powell in the 1960s, Sleight remains haunted by the lost beauty of a place that few non-native Americans experienced as a flowing river.

"I don't understand human thinking — to destroy temples, cathedrals," Sleight says in the opening sequence of a new film by [Sageland Media](#), "The Unfinished Fight of Seldom Seen Sleight."

"Would they flood the Sistine Chapel, flood the Mormon temple?" he continues. "Would the people accept that? Then you say, 'What could I have done?' We could have stopped it today. We couldn't then."

Sleight was immortalized in "The Monkey Wrench Gang," Edward Abbey's 1975 classic novel of environmental sabotage, as the polygamist "Jack Mormon" character named Seldom Seen Smith. It's an association that Sleight, who remained friends with Abbey until his death in 1989, has never been able to fully shake, and one that often becomes the focus of interviews, including in the new 45-minute documentary that premiered at the Wild and Scenic Film Festival last year and is being screened online Tuesday by the [Utah Film Center](#).

"It helped me become an environmentalist for sure," Sleight said of his

friendship with Abbey and the construction of Glen Canyon Dam in a recent interview with The Salt Lake Tribune. True to form, Sleight interrupted the phone call to share the admiration for the wild turkeys standing on his porch in northern San Juan County.

"Three of them flew up on the railing," he laughed with obvious joy in his voice. "Beautiful birds."

Chris Simon, the Utah-based filmmaker who directed the documentary, said Sleight's love of the natural world also shaped Abbey's views. "There was a lot of mutual influence" between the two friends, she said.

But Sleight's career and activism have taken him far beyond dreams of God supplying "one little pre-cision earthquake" at the Glen Canyon Dam site, as Abbey's Smith asks for in a famous scene in the novel.

"He's one of the classic Utah characters," Simon said. "He's touched so many lives. ... To me, the number one thing that Ken Sleight has done is inspire people to stand up for whatever land they personally love."

Standing up has taken on different forms for Sleight over the decades, including after he moved with his wife, Jane, in 1986 to Pack Creek south of Moab, where they ran a backcountry outfitting and guide service.

He fought in the successful campaign to block [a nuclear waste dump](#) from being established near Canyonlands National Park in the 1980s, and around that same time protested the construction of the White Mesa uranium mill, which [continues to operate and remains a focus of environmental debate in southeast Utah](#).

Sleight later served as chair of the San Juan County Democrats where he worked with Navajo and Ute Mountain Ute colleagues to expand Native

American voting rights, including through a campaign to run a Native American candidate for every open county position one year.

"We were trying to show the county that Native Americans had never had complete representation," Sleight said. "[Mark Maryboy](#) was the only one able to get [into office], but that was the start of a lot of good stuff."

Sleight said he was happy to see those efforts finally come to fruition with [the election of the county's first majority-Native American Commission in 2018 following a long voting rights lawsuit brought by the Navajo Nation](#).

"[The new commission] has done a great job," he said.

Perhaps Sleight's most famous action from that time period came when he rode his horse in front of a bulldozer that was chaining old-growth pinyon-juniper forest on Bureau of Land Management land to clear pasture land near his home in the early '90s.

"He's one of the last of ... a Western outlaw breed of environmental hero," Sand Sheff, former wrangler for Ken Sleight Expeditions, says in the film.

The documentary features numerous interviews, including with John Weisheit, a river guide who was inspired by Sleight to found the advocacy organization [Living Rivers](#); Ken Sanders of Ken Sanders Rare Books; and Tim DeChristopher, who, as a University of Utah student in 2008, protested an oil and gas lease sale in southeast Utah by [bidding on parcels of Bureau of Land Management land](#). He spent two years in prison for the action.

"DeChristopher was a very welcome person on the scene," Sleight said. "I really like him."

But despite his wide-ranging interests, Glen Canyon is never far from Sleight's mind. "The Unfinished Fight of Seldom Seen Sleight" and the similarly named 2018 short documentary by Taylor Graham, "[Seldom Seen](#)

[Sleight](#)," both repeat the story that has been told many times before about the drowning of Glen Canyon: the submersion of elaborate petroglyphs and cliff dwellings as well as the loss of dozens of gorgeous side canyons, amphitheaters and hanging gardens.

Neither film, as is the case with many Glen Canyon requiems, touches on the loss of Navajo Nation land by the flooding of the canyon and the relocation of families to the Aneth extension of the Navajo Nation in southeastern San Juan County. (A 1958 agreement between the Navajo Nation and the National Park Service is [currently being renegotiated](#), and some tribal members are pushing to do away with a buffer zone between the reservation and the reservoir that limits the tribe's jurisdiction.)

Simon's film, however, does cover the latest push to restore Glen Canyon — not through a precision earthquake — but as part of the [One-Dam Solution](#) and [Fill Mead First](#) campaigns. Proponents of the idea, which include environmentalists and some water managers, argue that the storage capacity of both Lake Mead and Lake Powell far exceeds the amount of water in the Colorado River basin. In order to save water lost through seepage and evaporation, Glen Canyon Dam could be decommissioned and water stored in Lake Mead and underground aquifers instead.

Over the past year, the level of Lake Powell dropped by 27 feet, and Lake Powell and Lake Mead — the two biggest reservoirs in the United States — are both less than 40% full. The possibility that Lake Powell could reach "dead pool," with the water level falling below the turbine intakes, is [increasingly likely in the face of climate change](#), and [some analysts fear it could happen with just two back-to-back years of drought](#).

When asked if there's anything people should know about his life or work that doesn't get discussed often enough in interviews, Sleight returned to a familiar refrain.

"I'd still like to see the water from the reservoir — what I call Lake Foul — I

think it all ought to be drained and the water be flushed downstream to be stored in Lake Mead," Sleight said. "One thing is for sure: We're still trying to resurrect Glen Canyon."

"The Unfinished Fight of Seldom Seen Sleight" will be screened for free at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 12, by the Utah Film Center. Doug Fabrizio of KUER's Radio West will moderate a question-and-answer session after the screening featuring filmmakers and others. The film will only be available for viewers who tune in during the livestream event. Visit utahfilmcenter.org for more information and to pre-order the livestream.

Zak Podmore is a [Report for America](#) corps member and writes about conflict and change in San Juan County for The Salt Lake Tribune. Your donation to match our RFA grant helps keep him writing stories like this one; please consider making a tax-deductible gift of any amount today by clicking [here](#).