Eco Fighting for Rivers: Living Rivers keeps David Brower's legend alive

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It's a warm June morning on the Yampa River and 66-year-old river guide Dee Holladay stands in the shade of Mantle Cove, a magnificent alcove of sandstone in Dinosaur National Monument that harbors ruins from the ancient Fremont civilization. While his guests quietly peruse the alcove, Holladay watches swifts dart back and forth among the high cliffs. The birds are making a ruckus but only a few others notice them. "Look," he says, using his stained coffee mug as a pointer, "they're fighting."

The same could be said about many of Holladay's floatmates this week--although they're not fighting each other, they're fighting for rivers. The nonprofit Living Rivers--an environmental group primarily focused on draining Lake Powell--has gathered river and wilderness advocates to float the canyons of the Yampa and Green with Holladay's Holiday River Expeditions. The trip's purpose is to celebrate the life of David Brower, who first floated through Dinosaur in 1953 as the head of the Sierra Club. Afterward he singlehandedly defeated two dams that had been proposed for the monument. In doing so, he launched the modern conservation era but forsook Glen Canyon, which now sits below the motor-heavy waters of Lake Powell. It was a decision that haunted Brower the rest of his life. A cunning fighter for wilderness, he died in 2000 at the age of 88, but his fight presses on through Living Rivers, which he helped found just before his death.

Those floating with Holladay in June included Roderick Nash, whose 1967 book Wilderness and the American Mind has been noted as one of the most definitive pieces ever written on wilderness; Jeffrey Ingram, an activist characterized in Marc Reisner's book Cadillac Desert as Brower's "most valuable" asset in successfully fighting off dams proposed for the Grand Canyon in the 1960s; Kim Crumbo, former Grand Canyon river guide and activist with the Arizona Wilderness Coalition; and former river guide John Weisheit, who serves as Living Rivers' conservation director. They're all fighting for more responsible water usage, specifically fewer dams and eliminating motorized vessels on the Colorado in the Grand Canyon. "This is not a happy river," says Ingram of the Colorado. "Outfitters spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to defend themselves against outside interests. Private floaters are angry because of the grievances they go through to get on the river and because they're discriminated against. And people like me have been angry for 30 years because we think it should be wilderness."

Among those present, the 49-year-old Weisheit is these days the one most often tangling with the Bureau of Reclamation and Western politicians. The Los Angeles native first met Brower in the early 1990s, when he told Brower that he hated him for not fighting Glen Canyon Dam. Brower responded by asking for forgiveness, and for help. So that's what Weisheit did. And it's Glen Canyon Dam that he has in the crosshairs, although there are others on his agenda (see sidebar). "We can't manage our rivers this way," he says. "We have sacrificed our natural heritage for short-term gain."

But for these activists, going after Glen Canyon Dam is akin to a mosquito trying to suck a bison dry. The Glen Canyon National Recreation Area and Lake Powell are visited by more than 2 million people annually--making it one of the National Park Service's most popular sites. The Bureau of Reclamation says the reservoir ensures water for millions of Southwest residents. Perhaps more important, however, the Bureau sees Glen Canyon Dam as a symbol of its ability to fundamentally change the desert landscape. Giving up Lake Powell would require the Bureau to turn its back on nearly a century of dogmatic belief that the Colorado River must be harnessed in order to make it valuable. Indeed, this summer Bureau Commissioner John Keys was quoted by The Associated Press as saying the decommissioning of Glen Canyon Dam "is something that's never going to happen. I won't spend a dollar studying it."

Barry Wirth, public affairs officer for the Bureau's Upper Colorado Office in Salt Lake City, says furthermore that if Glen Canyon were drained, there would have to be someplace else for that water to be stored. That reservoir, he says, is simply too important to the well-being of the seven states that depend on the Colorado River. "The current drought has clearly driven home the importance of Glen Canyon Dam," he says, adding that the Bureau's focus is how to balance the needs of agricultural and industrial interests, the public and conservation groups.

Given such statements, Ingram, 66, says being an activist is like "banging your head against a 710-foot concrete wall," which, incidentally, is the height of Glen Canyon Dam. But Weisheit, like Brower before him, doesn't belch anger despite his fanatical belief that Glen Canyon Dam wastes water and is killing the Grand Canyon. He speaks softly and fluidly, smiling often. He sees children as his inspiration, hoping to give them the chance to visit the former Glen Canyon with their own children.

Despite the enormous task, Weisheit believes he will see Glen Canyon drained. "Congress built these dams and said we'd worry about the problems later" he says. "Well, later is now, and the public needs to know there are alternatives." One of Lake Powell's primary problems is the loss of water due to sediment buildup, seepage and evaporation. According to Scott Miller's 2000 report titled "Undamming Glen Canyon," published in the Stanford Environmental Law Journal, some 65 million tons of sediment fills Lake Powell each year, reducing storage capacity. Evaporation accounts for the second highest consumptive use of Lake Powell's waters, behind only irrigation. Bank seepage accounts for 350,000 acre-feet of water being lost each year. The hydropower produced by the dam provides electricity for only 3 percent of the region, according to Miller. And the cold, clear water being sent through the Grand Canyon harms endemic fish that have evolved over millennia in warm, silty water. "These systems are going to fail before our mortgages are paid," says Weisheit. "And I don't want to pass our poor planning on to future generations. It's unacceptable and it's embarrassing."

Weisheit also points out that this year Lake Powell was only half full due to the drought. He says if the current drought persists, the reservoir will be empty in two years, rendering the dam useless for water storage and power generation. Of removing the dam, he says, "people are beginning to believe that it's not impossible."

On the day that Holladay and his group float into Echo Park, the confluence of the Yampa and Green and approximate site of one of the two proposed dams Brower defeated, he asks everyone to stay silent, allowing their senses to take in the canyon's immensity and the power of two rivers becoming one. Overhead a turkey vulture rides a thermal, floating gently among the 500 foot high canyon walls. Cliff swallows dart back and forth looking for insects. On the bank a lone deer grazes quietly. The sun is warm and the Yampa's muddy waters sparkle beneath an unspeakably blue sky. Other than the sound of the oars plying the river, it is silent. As Roderick Nash floats his dory through these spared canyon walls, he reflects on the significance of Brower's fight. "The only reason why we're not on a lakeshore right now," he says, "is because somebody cared."

Sidebar

Glen Canyon Dam isn't the only bull's-eye being targeted by Living Rivers. The several-hundred-member-strong group promotes large-scale river restoration, habitat preservation and responsible water use. Among the many issues on its agenda, the group has asked the Bureau of Reclamation to decommission Flaming Gorge Dam in northeast Utah. Flowing cold and gin clear from the dam, the Green River here is the best tailwater trout fishery in the country, but Living Rivers contends that the cold water coming from the reservoir is killing the warm-water-loving and endangered humpback chubs as well as the riparian habitat downriver in Dinosaur National Monument. Living Rivers is also trying to preserve a permanent water flow into the Colorado River Delta in Mexico's Gulf of California. In addition, the group opposes the Big Straw, a proposal to siphon water from the Colorado River near the Utah-Colorado border and pump it back to the Front Range of the Rockies to fuel urban growth. "As these depletions continue, we'll find fewer rivers to run because we can't seem to lose our addiction for irresponsible water use," says Living Rivers' John Weisheit.