Politics Only Hurdle to Draining Lake Powell, New Analysis Reveals 02/08/00

By John Weisheit

The Stanford Environmental Law Journal recently published an 88-page analysis of the Sierra Club's 1996 proposal to restore Glen Canyon on the Colorado River by draining Lake Powell reservoir.

The extensively researched analysis titled, "Undamming Glen Canyon: Lunacy, Rationality, or Prophecy" was written by Scott Miller, an attorney with the Office of the Solicitor, U.S. Department of the Interior. The analysis is his own, however, and in no way represents any official government position on the future of Glen Canyon Dam.

Mr. Miller examined: existing laws pertaining to the management of the Colorado River; technical and economic issues pertaining to anticipated impacts on water storage and energy supply; and the variety of impacts associated with changes in the recreational uses within Glen Canyon. Some key findings are excerpted below.

LAW OF THE RIVER: If we take a close look at the [Sierra Club] proposal, we may find that there is flexibility still hidden in the rigid Law of the River. We may also find crucial benefits to making the Law of the River itself more flexible.

WATER: Practically speaking, the effects of draining Lake Powell on water availability are surprisingly minimal, though not altogether absent. Politically, speaking, however, effects on water use are the most difficult problem facing the Sierra Club's proposal.

POWER: Although Glen Canyon's raw generating capacity of 1,300 MW is impressive, it is not irreplaceable. ... Furthermore, there is currently significant surplus of power in the Colorado Plateau region, so there would be a significant amount of time to find alternative sources of raw power. By the time additional sources of power are needed the life-span of Glen Canyon Dam's powerplant may be considerably reduced; in a few hundred years, accumulated sediments will completely eliminate power production from Glen Canyon Dam.

RECREATION: Perhaps the most fundamental question concerning recreation, however, is how much recreation do we really want on Lake Powell and in the Grand Canyon? ... The two-and-a-half million visitors to Lake Powell leave an extraordinary amount of trash on the beaches and on the lake. Along Lake Powell's 2,000 miles of coastline there are only forty-six restrooms. Fouled by human waste, beaches along the lake are periodically closed. Visitors consume about five million gallons of gas on their Lake Powell vacations each year. .... Perhaps present recreation should be limited in any case. Doing so might also limit any costs of draining Lake Powell."

ENVIRONMENT: In sum, environmental costs and benefits associated with draining Lake Powell are presently unclear. Here, perhaps more than any other issue, our current knowledge is severely insufficient to accurately evaluate the consequences. At the same time, the [Colorado] Plateau's native fishes, the Sea of Cortez's vaquita and totoaba, and the delta itself may not wait for decades of study.

CONCLUSIONS : This preliminary analysis of water, power, recreation, and the environment reveals that some of the common assumptions about the importance of Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell may not be accurate. Even so, analysis has its limitations. There are values involved that simply cannot be balanced with dollars or any other economic valuations. ... Just look to the Florida Everglades, where the federal and state governments have already spent $3.5 billion and plan to dedicate nearly $8 billion more to habitat restoration, or the Columbia River where $3 billion already has been spent trying [to] save and restore the salmon and steelhead.

"Although preliminary, Miller's analysis represents the best compilation of facts to date concerning the proposal to drain Lake Powell. The barriers to a restored Glen Canyon are not so much technical or economic, as political. It was politics that inundated Glen Canyon, and it will be a people's movement that will bring about its restoration," said Owen Lammers, Executive Director of the Glen Canyon Action Network, the Colorado River advocacy group based in Moab, Utah.

"This analysis helps to further awaken the public to the potential of reviving the declining ecosystems in the Grand Canyon," said Lisa Force, of the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, the nation's leading advocate on behalf of endangered species. "The more people who become aware that the Grand Canyon is itself endangered by Glen Canyon Dam, the sooner the dam's decommissioning will become a reality."

This issue of the Stanford Environmental Law Journal also published a foreword by Dr. Richard Ingebretsen, President of the Glen Canyon Institute, based in Flagstaff, Arizona.