

Opinion: One of Utah's outdoor treasures is at risk

By prioritizing energy development over sustainable recreation or habitat preservation, the BLM fails to understand what makes the White River a magnificent and important setting.



Like other forms of outdoor recreation, river running [has exploded in popularity](#) over recent years. Unlike other forms of recreation in which thousands of miles of routes support motorized adventure or networks of mountain biking trails

can be expanded, there are only so many rivers.

While the desire for water-based activities has grown, the available space along the rivers is uniquely limited. Both the permitted systems that preserve solitude, and the non-permitted sections that preserve access, are overwhelmingly popular assets of our society. For some, the increased competition for launch permits and the crowding along the narrow river corridor has created a wall to reasonable access to these world famous resources and sacred places.

In my experience, boaters are an adventurous group of people and will seek out sections of river underutilized or undervalued for one reason or another. One example is the White River Canyons. Utah's White River has [historically received less recreational attention](#) than adjacent permitted river sections such as Desolation Canyon and Dinosaur National Monument along the Green River, but it is no less special.

For generations, the White River has simultaneously enjoyed a low-key reputation and has been a checklist river trip on the Colorado Plateau. Various river guides have been published and outfitters have irregularly marketed canoe trips on the White. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recognizes the importance of these recreational values found on the river corridor, [designating a Special Recreation Management Area](#) in the canyon. Dating back to 2008, the

BLM made a suite of other planning objectives along the White that would have supported a spectrum of recreational activities, identified important habitat conditions, provided enhanced access and wild land preservation. However, the BLM has never acted upon any of those decisions.

By not implementing these management decisions, the BLM is contributing to the crowding of water based activities. It is critical that the BLM ensures the continued availability of equitable and quality recreational access, protects the health and safety of visitors and protect the many values along the river corridor. The BLM also must prioritize planning and investment for the White River. This will ensure that local communities receive the [maximum economic benefit from recreation](#) and are connected to the resource, users are educated, user data is collected and agency and partner capacity is directed toward recreation and landscape protection. To not do so would be a serious blunder of land stewardship.

To many of us, it seems as though the BLM has all but ignored recreation along the White River while prioritizing energy development. [Oil and gas infrastructure sprawls](#) over a landscape the size of Maryland across the Uinta Basin, with an [outsized contribution](#) to fossil fuel emissions. I have no doubt that this kind of land use will continue posing a threat to the White River Canyons.

We can not accept the BLM's efforts to lease large chunks of the river corridor, notably [nominating parcels](#) that ran rim-to-river and were removed only after significant protest from the conservation community. These parcels should never have been nominated in the first place, and they demonstrate how seriously the BLM misunderstands and mismanages this world-class resource.



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It's a safe bet to assume land managers will remain inclined to enable the encroachment of the industrialized juggernaut beyond the rim of the White River Canyons. As boaters we must use it, or lose it. Once the machine grows over the land, there is no multi-use.

Many boaters may never have considered a trip on the White River, and some, understandably, may wish to keep this

canyon off the radar of popular river trips. But, in this case, it's clear that the river has more at risk than our own individual experience.

One of the best parts of boating is your first time visiting a new river, a new canyon. Every bend unveiling different stories to read, moves to make, a setting to take part in and behold. What becomes more scarce is the experience of laying our eyes on a place for the first time. We crane our heads upward and outward at the geology, wildlife or riparian systems. Simply put, solitude requires a setting.

By prioritizing energy development over sustainable recreation or habitat preservation, the BLM fails to understand what makes the White River a magnificent and important setting. Without an understanding of the current recreational use and a failure to perform basic monitoring and evaluation tasks, the agency is unable to adequately plan for the future of recreation. These shortsighted decisions are putting a free-flowing and important river in peril — and boaters, and the general public, should care.



Cody M. Perry

Cody M. Perry is co-founder of *Rig To Flip*, a media company specializing in stories about the Colorado River Basin and Program Director for the Upper Green River Network, a project of Living Rivers. He lives in Dolores, Colorado.

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