

The Dolores River Synopsis: An Unequaled Opportunity

by Bill Dvorak, Vice Chair
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In April of 1993, the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) issued a scoping document regarding the modification of the operation of McPhee Dam. The intention is to change existing water release criteria established for fisheries in 1977, and acquire additional water rights for fish and wildlife purposes. BOR has since asked the Bureau of Land Management, National Forest Service, State of Colorado, and others to help partner, i.e., help pay for these additional water rights. It appears the time is right to expand this process to include other recreation users of the resource, not just fish and wildlife.

BOR has identified 8600 acre feet of water as being available for purchase. My though thought is by enlarging the scope of beneficiaries to include other recreational users, all parties can gain. The fisheries people want a pool of water to utilize as they deem necessary. The problem for the boating recreator is that the water managers have to predict run-off as accurately as possible or conservatively as the can to keep in the irrigators good graces. This year they aired on the extreme side of conservation run-able flows of 800 cfs were guaranteed only through June 18th, yet the release from McPhee continued to be in excess of 800 cfs, for the next nine days and over 600 cfs into the first of July. Unfortunately the folks who regulate the resource choose to ignore scientific data such as SNOTEL and soil conservation readings, and relied on photos of the La Plata Mountains. By acquiring water rights for recreation, we can take much of the guesswork out of the process.

If there were 8600 acre feet of water available for recreation, the flow regulators would have the ability to be far less conservative on flow predictions knowing they could utilize this water for augmentation. This would greatly enhance the length and reliability of the whitewater recreation season. (In case you are unfamiliar with the resource, the Dolores River ranks as one of the three or four best river trips available in this country, rivaling the Grand Canyon and the Middle Fork of the Salmon River.) Additionally the volume of water not utilized to augment flows to 800 cfs for whitewater could then be utilized to keep flow at 250 - 300 cfs for secondary low water season. This would allow canoes, kayaks, small rafts, inflatable kayaks, etc., additional access to this tremendous recreational/fishing resource.

This scenario would also benefit the fishery in many ways. Principally, it would conserve the fish pool so that there would be a significant amount of time elapsed before it was needed. had this program been in effect in 1993, it would have been the end of July or the first of August before the fisheries pool kicked in. It would also expand the fishery allowing it progress downstream as well as enlarge and improve fisheries habitat. This low-water season would also create a viable fishing resource.

Hopefully, you will see that this is a win for all concerned. The BOR will have a featured project it can use as an example for its' new direction, "An unequaled Opportunity." The recreational interests will have a longer and more reliable season as well as a secondary season. The Fish and wildlife will have an improved and enlarged habitat, plus an additional method of egress. We can't go wrong. Let's Do It!

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From the United States Fish and Wildlife Service

Recovery Program for the Endangered Fishes of the Upper Colorado

In the early 1900s landing Colorado squawfish estimated at 20 to 80 pounds gave some anglers the thrill of a lifetime, according to a research document released this week by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

"I pitched that green frog out there and this [Colorado squawfish] hit it, just about straight across, and he ran down that fast water, riffles, and took out about 200 feet of line before I turned him around," the report quotes Maybell, Colorado, resident Gene Bittler as saying. "It was one of the most thrilling fish I ever caught if you want to know the truth."

The report, "Historical accounts of the upper Colorado River Basin endangered fish," is based on more than 100 interviews conducted last year with senior citizens in Colorado, Utah and Wyoming. Written by Fred Quartarone, who worked for the Recovery Program for Endangered Fish of the Upper Colorado River, the document includes historic photos of the fish as well as residents' first-hand accounts of catching and eating the now-endangered Colorado squawfish, humpback chub, bonytail chub and razorback sucker.

Anglers reported catching voracious Colorado squawfish on everything from swallows and mice to earthworms and chunks of chicken or rabbit.

Tim Merchant of Green River, Wyoming, said his grandfather caught squawfish using chicken parts to bait multiple hooks on a clothesline. His grandfather tied the line to the bumper of his truck and waited.

"When [the line] went tight, they'd just back the truck up and drag those fish out on the bank," Merchant said. "They wee as big as a junior high school kid, 90 pounds. That's a big fish."

Anglers told of Colorado squawfish that were up to 5 feet long and 80 or more pounds; most recalled squawfish in the range of 20 to 40 pounds.

Many of the seniors said they used Colorado squawfish for food, especially during The Depression. Humpback chubs, bonytail chubs and razorback suckers also were consumed, but reportedly were bonier.