

Fifty Years of Opposition to Glen Canyon Dam

By Mathew Barrett Gross

In November of 1996, when David Brower convinced the Sierra Club's Board of Directors to endorse the draining of Powell Reservoir, an idea that had previously been held by a relatively select group of river runners, environmentalists, and Edward Abbey fans was hoisted on the American public. That same year had seen the founding of the Glen Canyon Institute, and, less than a year later, hearings were held in the U.S. House of Representatives on the merits of the Sierra Club's proposal. To those unfamiliar with the controversy that surrounds Glen Canyon Dam, the proposal may well have seemed to come from nowhere. In fact, however, the Sierra Club's proposal, the founding of Glen Canyon Institute, and the recent formation of the Glen Canyon Action Network are but chapters in a longer story of opposition to the inundation of Glen Canyon.

Although Glen Canyon was first suggested as a dam site in 1919 by E.C. LaRue, Chief Hydrologist of the U.S. Geological Survey, it wasn't until the introduction of the Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP) legislation in 1949 that the likelihood of a dam in Glen Canyon became serious enough to warrant organized opposition. In 1954, a group of environmentalists in Utah, led by Ken Sleight, formed the Friends of Glen Canyon, whose objective was to revive a near-forgotten 1938 proposal for a 4.5 million acre national monument that would encompass Glen Canyon and much of the Escalante region.

Friends of Glen Canyon failed, obviously, to reach their objective, and their failure was as much a result of loose organization as it was a result of being drowned out by the famed battle for Echo Park. When first introduced in Congress, the Colorado River Storage Project legislation contained provisions to build a dam at Echo Park, in Dinosaur National Monument (as well as at Glen Canyon, Flaming Gorge, and Bridge Canyon). It was the proposal to build a dam inside a unit of the National Park System, however, that sparked a national debate. For six years, the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and a coalition of nearly seventy environmental groups from around the nation worked to defeat the Echo Park proposal, and they eventually won. The success of the battle to save Echo Park was galvanizing-- historians mark the Echo Park debate as the birth of the modern environmental movement in the United States.

It should be noted, however, that there was never a "trade" of Echo Park for Glen Canyon. Glen Canyon was always in the CRSP legislation, and the objective of the Sierra Club and its coalition during the CRSP debate was the protection of the integrity of the park system. When the CRSP was passed by a slim Congressional majority on March 1, 1956, the Echo Park dam proposal was gone

from the CRSP; the Sierra Club had also won a proviso in the CRSP for a dam to be built to protect Rainbow Bridge National Monument, which was in danger of being encroached upon by the rising waters behind Glen Canyon Dam. Thus, at least publicly, the Sierra Club never relented on its main objective of protecting the national park system.

Having achieved victory at Echo Park, however, it soon became clear to many that Glen Canyon, though not a part of the park system, was a place of undeniable beauty, worthy of protection in its own right. Among those who came to this realization was David Brower, then-Executive Director of the Sierra Club, who felt a sense of personal responsibility for the Glen's loss.

The 1960's were a time of anguish for those who knew and loved the Glen before the dam, but, by the end of the decade, that anguish had given way to anger. In 1970, Friends of the Earth and Ken Sleight sued the federal government for allowing the waters of the reservoir to enter nearby Rainbow Bridge National Monument, in violation of the CRSP. The District court sided with the environmentalists, but the decision was reversed by the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals. Sleight and Friends of the Earth appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, but the court refused to hear the case, and the water rose into Rainbow Bridge National Monument.

1975 saw the publication of Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, a novel that (arguably) introduced a new generation of outdoor enthusiasts to what was lost behind the dam. Many observers have pointed to the novel as influential in the formation of the environmental group Earth First!, and thus it is appropriate, given the focus of the novel upon the destruction of Glen Canyon Dam, that Earth First! launched itself into the headlines by unfurling a three-hundred foot plastic "crack" along the front of the dam in 1981.

Like many Earth First! actions, "cracking" the dam was both creative and confrontational. By 1997, however, the movement to drain Powell Reservoir, led by the Glen Canyon Institute, had advanced beyond theatrics and into the realm of hard science. Currently, the Institute is conducting a Citizen's Environmental Analysis, based on NEPA guidelines, to study the effects of draining Powell Reservoir. Concurrently, the newly-formed Glen Canyon Action Network is working to build grassroots support for the restoration of Glen Canyon. Thus the movement to drain Lake Powell is alive and well, and, forty-six years after the formation of Ken Sleight's ragtag group, Glen Canyon still has its share of friends.

GLEN CANYON ACTION NETWORK

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Technical, Economic and Legal Hurdles to Draining Lake Powell not Insurmountable, but Politics Could be, New Analysis Reveals

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 General, U.S. Department of the Interior. 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 25

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."

Although Mr. Miller is in the employ of the Interior Department, the analysis is his own, and in no way represents

any official government position on the future of Glen Canyon Dam. The Stanford Environmental Law Journal also published a foreword by Dr. Richard Ingebretsen, President of the Glen Canyon Institute, based in Flagstaff, Arizona.

Copies of the analysis are available from GCAN at (435)259-1063, or through the fulfillment office of the Stanford Environmental Law Journal (650)725-0183. To obtain contact information for the author, Scott Miller, contact GCAN.

≈ **Glen Canyon Action Network** ≈ **People for the Integrity of the Colorado River** ≈

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