

These Utahns are changing the 'dude-centric' culture in the professional river rafting world

Sexism and harassment have plagued the river guiding industry around the country.

Moab • It happens almost every time Tyler Jameson leads a river rafting trip.

A man among the passengers will ask her something like, "Do you need a break? I'll row the boat for you."

Early in her career, Jameson would brush off a suggestion like that — and more direct comments about the size of her body, or questioning her strength as a professional river guide.

Now, she'll respond in a way that politely pushes back on the assumption behind it. She doesn't need a break, she might say, while inviting him to try rowing if he wants to.

"If I couldn't row a boat all day," she'll tell him, "I wouldn't be very good at my job."

Her approach is part of the new environment that guides are creating on rivers in Utah and the region — one where both women and men recognize sexism and sexual harassment in the moment, and know how to intervene effectively if they or a customer becomes uncomfortable while on the water.

“Trying to create safer spaces for people to be their authentic selves is the goal of a river trip,” said Lauren Wood, whose grandfather founded Holiday River Expeditions.

“Trying to create an experience where you are safe enough to let down those guards and kind of be present with yourself, with nature, is the whole point,” Wood said. “So if we’re not doing this work, we’re doing ourselves and our guests a disservice.”



(Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune) Laura Dewey, a river guide with Paddle Moab, guides a crew of eight paddleboarders down the Colorado River, Monday, Aug. 15, 2022.

Jameson leads trainings for co-workers at Holiday River, while others are hosting sessions elsewhere as guides talk about what's long been ignored in the male-dominated rafting industry.

The outdoor industry has [several risk factors](#) that the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission says can lead to harassment, including having a homogenous and young workforce, a reliance on customer satisfaction and workplaces that are frequently isolated or remote.

Guides will sometimes be stuck for a week or more living, eating and working on the river alongside clients. Jameson has worked in the industry long enough, she said, to know that other women experience unwanted comments, and behaviors that are "a bit more dark."

Harassment on the river

But sexual harassment on the river hasn't always been talked about in the guiding world. That started to change in 2016, when the Interior Department's inspector general released a report that detailed [a culture and pattern of sexual harassment](#) by National Park Service employees who were leading river trips for other federal employees and

contractors working in restoration and science projects.

The report came in response to a letter sent in 2014 by more than a dozen current and former Grand Canyon employees who alleged abuse and a hostile work environment targeting women.

It was those explosive allegations that led Maria Blevins, a former river guide and now a professor at Utah Valley University, to begin her research documenting sexual harassment often present within the river rafting industry — and to start to make efforts to change it.

She read that Grand Canyon report, she said, and thought back to her own experiences.

“I’d actually done a river trip with those guys, and I was like, ‘Those guys? They were so cool,’” she remembered. “And then I thought about it and I was like, ‘Well, except for when they asked us to run that rapid topless. Or when they were trying to get into my tent at night. All of these things were going through my mind that hadn’t even fazed me on the trip. I had just been like, ‘Oh well, that’s what you do on the river.’”

“But when I thought about it, we were all at work,” she added. “We were on a research trip. And people were hammered every night. They did things that would never be

asked of me at a different job."

Blevins found in her research that women have been hazed at work or told to shrug off crude jokes. Some have felt unsafe during overnight trips when men — either clients or coworkers — made unwanted sexual advances while they partied at night along the river.

What often happens to these women, Blevins found, is that they leave jobs they love and are good at because of this toxic work environment.

A 'dude-centric' culture

On a recent August morning, Margy Swenson tightened her life jacket and readied herself to float the Colorado River on a paddleboard, alongside her niece and a few others who booked a day trip with the local outfitter Paddle Moab.

Swenson is a paying customer on this day. But the Moab local knows Utah's rivers well — she spent a decade beginning in 1999 working as a professional guide.

She remembers being one of only three women working as a guide for a Vernal rafting company. The rest were men.

"And they let you know you weren't part of the group," she said.

To her, the behavior never felt like sexual harassment, but more like hazing, yet the targets of the pranks were always the handful of women who worked there.



(Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune) Laura Dewey, a river guide with Paddle Moab greets Margy Swenson, right, during a paddleboard trip down the Colorado River, Monday, Aug. 15, 2022. Swenson, a river rafting guide for 10 years from 1999 to 2009, experienced sexism and harassment from her former male coworkers.

Swenson remembers once coming back from a hike she'd led to discover her male coworkers had taken her tent, fully set up, and hung it high in a tree. She recalled another time when the male guides had told one of her female colleagues that she hadn't tied her boats down correctly and they had

floated away — when they had hid them in a nearby creek bed that was out of view from the river.

Other river guides who spoke to The Salt Lake Tribune recalled a similar culture.

Colin Evans doesn't remember having female coworkers when he started guiding in Colorado in 2006. But he remembers how much he disliked the macho atmosphere.

"It was really a bullyish culture," he said. "Very dude-centric. I couldn't stand it. But that's how I learned."

Evans said he was never personally bullied by his coworkers. And when he got to Utah and continued working in the industry, topics like sexism or harassment just weren't talked about.

He lives in Moab, and is now the president of the [Colorado Plateau River Guides](#), a nonprofit whose members are professional guides who work on the rivers in the southwest United States.



The organization has been around in fits and starts since the early 1990s. One of its hallmarks in the early days, Evans said, was hosting days-long interpretive training trips for guides. They would spend days floating down a river, learning lessons about astronomy, biology or camp life — critical skills needed for professional guides who need to be experts not only in directing boats safely, but also be able to answer any question a guest might have about the water, the rock formations around them or the vegetation they float past.

Richard Rootes, a CPRG board member, recently took a Tribune reporter and photographer on a float trip down the Daily, a calm stretch of the Colorado River in Moab that he's

done hundreds of times. As he smoothly cut through the brown water with his paddles, he recalled being on those early training trips and hanging on the words of river guiding legends who would share their experiences with the ones who were coming up in the rafting world.

Like Evans, he doesn't remember there ever being a discussion of sexual harassment that could happen on the river. There was no talk of appropriate boundaries, or what to do if you saw a coworker being targeted by a client or a colleague.

"That kind of stuff, it was around," he said, "But nobody really talked about it."

A lesson in Cataract Canyon

When Evans took over as president of the Colorado Plateau River Guides, he wanted to bring back those interpretive trips. He organized a four-day trip in the spring, with guides from six local outfitters.



But this year was different from the training trips of years past. It was time, organizers believed, to start talking about sexism and harassment within their industry.

They tapped Cora Phillips, director of prevention and education for Moab's [Seekhaven Family Crisis and Resource Center](#), which helps people who have experienced domestic violence and sexual assault.



(Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune) Colin Evans, center, president of the Colorado Plateau River Guides (CPRG), shares a laugh with Richard Rootes, a CPRG board member and river guide and Cora Phillips, the Director of Prevention and Education for Seekhaven Family Crisis and Resource Center in Moab, Wednesday, Aug. 10, 2022.

When Phillips does these types of trainings, it's usually a more typical classroom presentation using a projector and a slideshow. But when she and Blevins led the discussion with 37 Moab river guides during their interpretive trip in April, they were on the sandy shores in Cataract Canyon.

If they see someone on the river making an inappropriate comment or pushing boundaries, she said during the evening talk, they can distract the people in the situation.

Or they can take direct action, saying, "We don't use that language here." They can also seek someone else's help as a way to establish within the group that the behavior is not an acceptable social norm.

Finally, she said, she taught the guides to check-in with the person who has been targeted, to make sure they are OK and feel supported.

In smaller groups, the guides discussed example scenarios and how they could respond. The deep conversations, she said, lasted for hours.

"It was clear that they were just itching for a space to talk about this," Phillips said, "and a safe environment where they could really process with other people."

Professional guides feel at home on the water, Evans said, and tend to be more open and comfortable in the outdoors.

"When you ask them those questions out on the river," he said, "I think you're going to get a better reaction than if you put them in a room in a community center and you tried to have that under fluorescent lights."

A changing industry

That training has had a ripple effect, Phillips said. After a few guides from Western River Expeditions returned from that

trip, she said, they spoke to management and encouraged training companywide. Phillips did the training again for 80 people in that company.

In total this year, Phillips said she's trained over 300 people working in the outdoor industry. And more training is being done elsewhere, like at Holiday River Expeditions, where Wood said their guides have participated in a four-hour course at the beginning of the season for the last two years.

The goal, Wood said, is to talk about how some behaviors that start out innocuous can become problematic; and "how we can disrupt those moments and intervene on behalf of our friends."

"Because our coworkers are our friends," Wood said.

"They're often best friends out there in the field. And no one wants their friends to be messed with."



(Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune) "Trying to create safer spaces for people to be their authentic selves is the goal of a river trip," said Lauren Wood of the river guides and customers of Holiday River Expeditions, Wednesday, Aug. 10, 2022. Wood, who was raised running the rivers of the Colorado Plateau region, co-authored the company's code of conduct, which all clients are required to sign before getting on the company's boats. Wood has also made efforts to create safer spaces for people of color and those in the LGBTQ+ community.

Wood, who is non-binary, has also made efforts to create safer spaces for clients — by putting on trips specifically for people of color and those in the LGBTQ+ community. And all clients, they said, are required to sign a code of conduct before getting on their boats.

Blevins is also part of the [A-DASH Collaborative](#), which provides sexual harassment training and consultation for outfitters across the country. She said she's seeing a change in the industry — people are ready to have hard conversations, and companies want their guides to feel safe and comfortable.

And who is on the river is changing, too.

On a recent day in Moab, dozens of people clad in life jackets milled near a popular drop-in spot along the Colorado River, waiting for their river guides to unload their rafts from a trailer into the water.

About half of the professionals lugging gear and leading these groups were women — a far cry from 20 years ago when a female guide was an anomaly.

"Representation is changing," Blevins said. "Who we're imagining is going to be out in the wilderness is different. It's not just going to be a tall, beard-y white dude. Like Ed Abby isn't the only one that gets to be outside anymore. It's people with a lot of [different kinds] of bodies. It's people of a lot of colors."



(Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune) Multiple Colorado River rafting companies set sail from Lower Onion Creek Rapids on the Colorado River, Saturday, Aug. 13, 2022.

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