

Spring 2005 Honorable Mention

Nick Parker

Instructor's Foreword

On its surface, “The Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell: Mistakes Worth Fixing” is an essay that advocates the draining of Utah’s Lake Powell for the sake of preserving nature. But beneath the surface, in its crust, the argument is an appeal to ethical concerns: What kind of world will our children live in? If the right thing to do and the practical thing to do are one and the same, how can we not act? Can a gesture of penance atone for our sins (in this case, against our planet)? And yet deeper still, at the core, the essay touches the kind of personal strain that a respected professor once described to me, a strain that separates the great books from the rest. The train of thought that culminated in this essay was practically years old; it all began with Nick reading Wallace Stegner’s “Wilderness Letter” for an American literature course back in high school, before Nick ever knew he would come to Stanford, much less be enrolled in my PWR 1 section on manifestos. Stegner’s letter vocalized a stance that Nick sympathized with, that made eloquent the naturalist’s lobby, and in doing so both validated and motivated Nick’s interest in environmental issues. The reflections of Nick’s argument have a history: his interest in nature conservation coupled with a more abstract concern with posterity, the latter of which I still wonder about often. Though it is likely that the published words of an author will survive him, they stand a better chance if dense with conviction.

David Colón

The Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell: Mistakes Worth Fixing

Nick Parker



*Figure 1. Rainbow Bridge National Monument. Thomas Wiewandt. 1956.
<http://www.wildhorizons.com/images/RainbowBridge_Southwest.jpg>.*

The Rocky Mountain region of the western United States is, essentially, a giant desert. There is no shortage of breathtaking natural beauty, but it is virtually bereft of the resources necessary for human life. And yet, despite the rugged nature of the country, the American West was the fastest growing part of the nation in the mid-twentieth century. During that time, one of the greatest concerns for the West was the scarcity of – and desperate need for – water, a problem that was predicted by naturalist and explorer John Wesley Powell one hundred years beforehand. To cope with the astronomical growth of the western United States and its cities' need for water, the utilitarian federal government agreed to build numerous hydroelectric dams throughout the West which, they hoped, would not only provide power, but would also store precious water in enormous reservoirs. Unfortunately, these dams also scarred and destroyed the surrounding environment. One of these monstrous dams was in southern Utah, at Glen Canyon. In damming the Colorado River, the federal government committed a shortsighted mistake that has had serious long-term consequences. Now that the dam's hydroelectric power is obsolete and the area is being used only as a recreational resource, there is a desperate need for a thorough reevaluation of the area and its importance to all Americans. Continuing to let the waters of Lake Powell smother the beautiful features of long-lost Glen Canyon is a stain on our collective public conscience. As such, we need to drain Lake Powell and let the restorative properties of nature take care of the area. The full draining of the lake – which would be economically profitable as well as spiritually refreshing – is the only adequate option available to us.

The Complicated History Behind the Dam

In the early-mid 1950's, the federal government considered various proposals to dam the Grand Canyon. Responding to and feeding off of the American public's familiarity with and love for the threatened national landmark, many environmental groups, headed by the up-and-coming Sierra Club, led the fight to table these proposals and eliminate any potential for a dam in Grand Canyon. In order to gain public support for keeping the Canyon devoid of concrete, conservationists demonized the proposals' proponents, while at the same time championing their own cause. As Byron Pearson wrote, "Grand Canyon belonged to everyone, preservationists argued, and it was those who sought to deface it with dams who were selfish, not the people trying to save it" (141). While environmentalists were successful in preventing the construction of a dam in Grand Canyon, that fight blinded them from other, equally pressing issues. In the late 1950's, the Sierra Club led the charge to stop dams proposed for the Grand Canyon, but it did not object to a dam in little-known Glen Canyon (Price F1). The Sierra Club's protection of Grand Canyon was of great importance to the American public, whose objection to the proposals contributed significantly to the concentrated efforts of environmental groups to prevent a dam in the area. Unfortunately, this victory came at a high price.

After the idea of a dam in Grand Canyon failed, the federal government told the American public that if there was to be no dam in Grand Canyon, there had to be one somewhere else nearby. Many Americans knew very little about that area of the country aside from the wonders of Grand Canyon; consequently, they cared less about dams in other places, and environmentalists were faced with a choice: either approve a dam on the Green River in Northern Utah that would flood much of Dinosaur National Monument or a dam on the Colorado River at Glen Canyon, located just 15 miles upstream of the border of Grand Canyon National Park. The uniqueness, relative popularity, and accessibility of Dinosaur National Monument in combination with the obscurity and isolation of Glen Canyon prompted the Sierra Club, which had, by 1956, become the face of American environmentalism, to oppose the dam on the Green River and approve the proposed dam at Glen Canyon. As David Brower, the executive director of the Sierra Club at the time, wrote, "In 1956 the Club directors instructed me . . . to end the club's opposition to the construction of the dam at Glen Canyon if the two dams proposed upstream in Dinosaur were dropped" (181). The Sierra Club accepted and even approved of the compromise, and its leaders willingly sacrificed one of nature's jewels for another. Brower revealed that he "even urged the construction of a higher Glen Canyon dam as a way to save Dinosaur" in the first few months of the fight over Dinosaur National Monument (181). In explicitly placing a higher value on Dinosaur National Monument than Glen Canyon, the Sierra Club doomed a unique, beautiful area of the West simply because its secret beauty was less familiar than that of another place.

After the Glen Canyon Dam was completed in 1963 and the Colorado's waters began to back up behind it to form Lake Powell, Brower visited the area for the first time. Immediately, he regretted his decision to sacrifice Glen Canyon and blamed himself for ignoring the protests of its supporters – including Wallace Stegner's warning that, "Dinosaur doesn't hold a candle to Glen" – who had unsuccessfully tried to convince him to protect the area from damming (Brower 182). Brower's prioritization of Dinosaur National Monument over Glen Canyon was the product of a simple lack of knowledge, and upon visiting the area, the Sierra Club's executive director realized that his "problem [was] not having seen Glen before offering to give it away" (Brower 182). Brower's decision

to sacrifice Glen Canyon in favor of Dinosaur National Monument was based more on familiarity with Dinosaur and unfamiliarity with Glen than it was on the true comparative value of the two wilderness sanctuaries. To his credit, Brower did not let his uninformed decision define his life. As Tom Price, a reporter for *The New York Times*, explained, Brower “Lament[ed] the lost canyons and grottos as ‘the place no one knew,’ [and] spent the rest of his life attempting to undo his mistake” (F2). In his writings, Brower described spectacular stone temples and delicate marble canyons that were quickly disappearing under the waters of the lake, and he spent much of the rest of his life mourning these losses and trying unsuccessfully to persuade Congress to drain the lake and once again reveal the canyon’s lost treasures.

An Interminable Fight: Water in the American West

The addictive manifest destiny ideology that permeated American culture in the nineteenth century stimulated a massive East-West movement that began in the mid-1800’s period of gold rushes and intense immigration, before ending with the closing of the frontier in the mid-twentieth century. Throughout that time, and continuing to the present day, the most precious and controversial commodity in the West has remained constant: water. The history of the fight over water is a long and complicated one that has

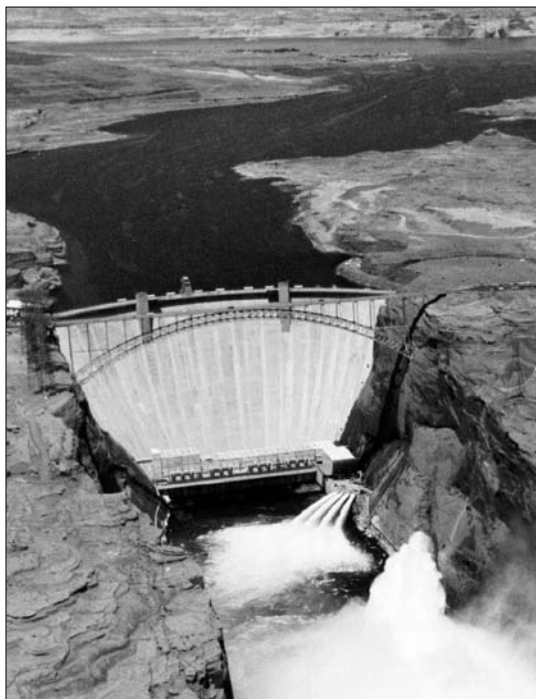


Figure 2. Glen Canyon Dam. Commissioned in 1957 and completed in 1963, this dam blocks the Colorado River just 15 miles upstream of the boundary of Grand Canyon National Park. <<http://www.usbr.gov/power/data/sites/glencanyon/glencyn.jpg>>.

existed ever since people began to populate the arid western half of this country. In turn, the relationship between water and the American West represents the usually harmful relationship between humans and nature. As Kevin Wehr writes, “The history of water and the American West, vast as it is, shows the continuities and changes over time of the relationship of humans to their environment. Through the settlement of the western frontier, the American state addressed concerns about scarcity by building an infrastructure on the landscape” (57). As the population of the West expanded and the Western states required more water, our relationship to the land became more tenuous. And, as Wehr explains, the “infrastructure” that we impose on nature has consequences not only on the environment, but also on man himself. “The establishment of large-scale water systems had profound effects upon the environment and society of the region” (42). The construction of massive dams and irrigation systems in the American West has had serious

repercussions, as humans have become dependent on artificial water systems that, despite their builders' desperate hopes, are not permanent.

This dependent relationship often manifests itself in the actions of the federal government, which has had a tendency to intervene on the water problem in the West. Beginning during the Great Depression of the 1930's and continuing through the Cold War era of the 1960's, hundreds of enormous dams were constructed in the Western half of the country. According to Wehr, "The construction of massive dams and irrigation projects is the most material outcome of an era of progressive government" (41). In constructing these dams and imposing damaging large-scale water systems on the fragile ecosystem of Western deserts, the federal government revealed its shortsighted, utilitarian side. Instead of considering the long-term consequences of its actions, the government ignored environmental concerns in an attempt to get a quick fix, a temporary solution to the rapidly growing water problem in the burgeoning American West. "The progressive manifestation of the utilitarian ideology of 'the greatest good for the greatest number,' . . . represents an acceleration of bureaucratic rationalization and human control of nature" (Wehr 41-42). In acquiescing to the demands of the ever-increasing population in Western cities by building dams without considering their repercussions, the federal government exposed its pragmatic ideology. In this way, the "bureaucratic rationalization and human control of nature" that Wehr discusses represents one half of the complicated debate over water.

Fundamentally, the fight over water in the West pits environmentalists against people who believe that nature exists simply for our benefit. These two sides – both of which appreciate the environment – are split into two opposing factions over the issue of water. At the heart of this schism is the question: What is more important, preservation or conservation? As Wehr writes, "There developed a split among those who believed in a need for the conservation of resources. On one side were the majority of government administrators, who held that resources must be used wisely in order to conserve them for the future. On the other side were those who believed in the preservation of wilderness based on aesthetic and spiritual values that, they argued, superseded all other human uses" (49). Though both sides agree that the environment is important and deserves our attention, they are also diametrically opposed in the sense that they value nature for different reasons. While some people believe that the wilderness is worth protecting and conserving because of its tangible, material benefits, others counter that nature is most beneficial in an abstract, spiritual sense. These opposing viewpoints reveal the broad scope of environmentalism and its proponents, ranging from utilitarian conservationists to purist preservationists, and the debate between the two sides is a fitting introduction to the controversy surrounding the Glen Canyon Dam.

The Spiritual Glory of Pre-Dam Glen Canyon

In order to fully understand the debate over the Glen Canyon Dam, it is necessary to appreciate what was lost under the waters of Lake Powell. The area's pre-dam wonders are available to us only through visitors' descriptions of the area, but these descriptions are enough to convey the tremendous beauty Glen Canyon must have harbored. Julius Stone, who was "The first – and for a long time the only – man to float through [Glen] Canyon not in pursuit of science or notoriety, of pelts or illusive pieces of gold, but solely for the pleasure of doing so" (Martin 158) described his 1909 trip with superlatives and with a great admiration for nature. He described Glen Canyon as a place, "where



Figure 3. *The Cathedral in the Desert. Considered the crown jewel of Glen Canyon, it is now submerged under the waters of Lake Powell.*

<http://www.drainit.org/photos/cath.jpg>.

Desert – which is considered by many to be the jewel of Glen Canyon. He described the Cathedral as a magical place where, “Orange-hued sandstone streaked with seeping water closed in from three sides, the rock soaring nearly 200 feet overhead. The walls above seemed to touch, parting just enough for a shaft of late afternoon light to warm the sepulchral chamber in a soft glow” (F2). Price’s romantic description of Glen Canyon echoes Stone’s, and is emblematic of the purists’ opinion that the area was most valuable aesthetically and spiritually, not for its potential as a reservoir.

Not everyone, however, saw pre-dam Glen Canyon in the same light, and the area had two very different meanings for two very different kinds of people. Utilitarian conservationists regarded Glen Canyon as wasted space, and they were unable to appreciate the area’s natural beauty. A 1924 report on Glen Canyon’s potential as a dam site captures the pragmatic ideology of the federal government, stating that, “The uninhabited canyon was of no particular value so far as is known” (qtd. in Martin 27). This disregard for natural beauty and the benefits that such a place can have on society is indicative of the government’s policy of sacrificing the environment in favor of myopic, utilitarian projects. Even former President Theodore Roosevelt – whose environmental legacy is strong – wanted the Colorado’s “waters that now run to waste . . . saved and used for irrigation” (qtd. in Martin 30). In this way, the government saw Glen Canyon not as a naturally beautiful place, but rather as an area full of potential for material use.

On the other hand, preservationists saw Glen Canyon as a Mecca for beauty and salvation, where the diversity of nature was in full bloom. Visitors to the area often described their experiences in Glen Canyon as mystical and otherworldly, using language often reserved for religious epiphanies. Eliot Porter, a lawyer in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was so overwhelmed by the area that his expressive language demonstrates the inability to do the area justice through words. He wrote that “the monumental structure of the towering walls in variety and color defied comprehension” and that the impression was so powerful that he “didn’t know where to look, what to focus on;” he believed he “was witnessing a dynamic remolding of the earth itself” (qtd. in Martin 177). Porter’s emotional description reflects the awe-inspiring qualities of Glen Canyon and accurately

represents the preservationists' opinion that, "the Colorado's canyons might be most valuable in terms of what they offered in the way of wonder" (Martin 159). Though they recognize the value of the wilderness as a material and recreational resource, purists believe that nature is most precious as a source of spiritual refreshment that cannot be quantified and should not be compromised in the name of "progress."

Lake Powell: A "Bizarre and Somehow Exciting" Place

There are many people, however, who believe that it is our right – and even our responsibility – to tailor the environment to suit our needs. As such, proponents of Glen Canyon Dam argue that Lake Powell is a gem, a recreational paradise in the otherwise inhospitable deserts of southern Utah. In some ways, they are right. Lake Powell provides recreational opportunities for the three million tourists it attracts each year, and these visitors bring in half a billion dollars annually to the area (United States 15). In addition, the dam and the five marinas that serve the lake provide jobs for the poor, uneducated Navajo Indians in the surrounding communities where unemployment levels can exceed fifty percent. Above all else, however, the dam's advocates focus on the recreational opportunities that Lake Powell – which, according to its website is, "America's Favorite Houseboating Destination" (The New Lake Powell 1) – provides. "Lake Powell holds working water – water for many purposes. And one of those purposes is to provide the people of this country with the finest scenic and recreational area in the Nation," wrote former commissioner of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Floyd Dominy, the man who pushed for the construction of Glen Canyon Dam (126). Lake Powell, Dominy would argue, is a recreational playground for all ages that offers its visitors a chance to explore a beautiful part of the country.

This exploration, Dominy and other supporters of Glen Canyon Dam claim, would not be possible without the dam, because Lake Powell's existence has made the area more accessible to the general public. Dominy encourages tourists, "to visit Lake Powell and especially to see that natural marvel Rainbow Bridge. Before Lake Powell, Rainbow Bridge National Monument could be visited only by the rugged few who 'packed' in. Now all of you can see it – easily" (127). Dominy argues that in the pre-dam era, the only people who were able to experience the beauty of Glen Canyon were "the rugged few" who were willing to go to great lengths to get there, but the construction of the dam and the subsequent creation of Lake Powell made the area more welcoming to the average American. The argument that Lake Powell is a popular recreational paradise that has made the area more accessible to visitors than it was before the dam is one that many conservationists and happy tourists use to rationalize and justify the creation of both Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell.



Figure 4. Rainbow Bridge National Monument.
<<http://www.grand-canyon-tours.biz/images/Lake%20Powell%20Rainbow%20Bridge.jpg>>.

Some proponents, however, also offer a more controversial defense of the dam, one that supports their position on a theological basis. The unconventional belief that Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell exist in harmony with God, while not widely held, is evident in the writing of the dam's fiercest sponsors such as Dominy, whose descriptions of the area are colorful and infused with religious symbolism. "The bright blue sky deepens slowly to a velvet purple and the stars are brilliant – glittering in the vast immensity above. Orange sandstone cliffs fade to dusky red – then to blackest black. The fire burns low – reflected in the placid lake. There is peace. And a oneness with the world and God" (128). Dominy sees a sacred spirituality in the waters of Lake Powell, and he applies these theological overtones to the environment as a whole, boldly using them to justify the dam. "There is a natural order to the universe. God created both man and nature. And man serves God. But nature serves man, and man has flung down a giant barrier in the path of the turbulent Colorado in Arizona. It has tamed the wild river – made it a servant to man's will" (qtd. in Martin 244-245). The proposition that nature is subservient to man – that "nature serves man" – and that there is a "natural order to the universe" is impossible to prove and is far



Figure 5. Lake Powell. Located in southwestern Utah, Lake Powell is a recreational paradise in the middle of the arid American West. <<http://www.photoscene.com/sberlin/scenics/lakepowell1.jpg>>.

more opinionated than other defenses of the dam, but it nonetheless surely resonates within a certain segment of the population. As viable and convincing as the defenses of Glen Canyon Dam may be – and while the area is still a beautiful place to visit – what was lost under the waters of Lake Powell was more spectacular than what remains today. To that end, some preservationists, such as Wallace Stegner, both acknowledge the sanctity of Lake Powell, while at the same time provide a reaffirmation of the drowned beauty of Glen Canyon. As Stegner explains, "Lake Powell *is* beautiful. It isn't Glen Canyon, but it is something in itself. The contact of deep blue water and uncompromising stone is bizarre and somehow exciting . . . And yet, vast and beautiful as it is, open now to anyone with a boat or the money to rent one . . . it strikes me, even in my exhilaration, with the consciousness of loss. In gaining the lovely and usable, we have given up the incomparable" (qtd. in Farmer 171). Stegner's recognition of the "bizarre and somehow exciting" beauty of Lake Powell reveals the nature of the controversy surrounding the dam. While he appreciates the increased accessibility of the area, Stegner also describes the "consciousness of loss" stimulated by the dam and laments that in making the Glen Canyon region more accessible to the general public we have lost the "incomparable" beauty of the original area. In doing so, Stegner begins to hint at the problems posed by Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell.

Questioning the Value of the Dam and the Uses of the Lake

The debate over Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell rages on today, as conservationists and preservationists compare and contrast the merits of the dam and the lake versus the merits of pre-dam Glen Canyon. The fundamental question at the center of the debate is, as Farmer writes, “Was it worth losing some of the beauty of this country when many more people can enjoy the great beauty that remains?” (129). Preservationists would argue that sacrificing an aesthetic resource as valuable and rare as Glen Canyon is not worth it, regardless of how positive the “benefits” are. As such, dam haters answer no and “argue for Glen Canyon’s superior beauty and the superior quality of its recreation” (Farmer 129). Meanwhile, conservationists and hedonists use a “quantity over quality” argument that stresses the recreational benefits of the lake. As Farmer writes, “The apologists, meanwhile, tend to emphasize recreational quantity – can millions of happy boaters be wrong?” (129). The two sides will likely continue this debate for many years to come and will never agree on the answer to Farmer’s question. However, if we care at all about the fate of future generations, we have a responsibility to thoroughly reevaluate the condition of Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell in light of problems with the area that have just recently been exposed.

Lake Powell is now nothing but an oversized bathtub, a recreational playground in the middle of the desert, and over the years it has collected huge quantities of litter thrown over the sides of boats and washed away from beaches. This appalling fact, that people are using the lake as a receptacle for their garbage, is partially a result of the kinds of tourists that visit Lake Powell, many of whom would have never considered backpacking in pre-dam Glen Canyon. According to a University of Utah student who visited the lake in the early 1990’s, “The most common motifs were ‘naked people,’ ‘boat wrecks,’ ‘dangerous feats,’ and ‘drinking too much.’ The party crowd often displays a disturbing lack of knowledge of – not to mention respect for – the local environment” (Farmer 172). This blatant disrespect for nature displayed by many of Lake Powell’s visitors is characteristic of the fun-loving crowd that the area attracts, but very *un*characteristic of the purists who visited Glen Canyon before it was dammed. As Farmer writes, “[The newcomers] come to Powell to show off their expensive toys and to get a tan to show off when they return home. It is no longer a place to get away” (173). Tragically, by making the area more accessible we have exposed a pristine place to the negative, consuming nature of our materialistic society.

The waste problems and careless, littering tourists that plague Lake Powell have been around since people first began using the lake as a vacation destination. The descriptions of the garbage that mars the lake and its shoreline are troubling, and they go a long way to debunk Floyd Dominy’s claim that nature exists solely to serve man. “Lake Powell has a history of waste problems. . . . Toilet paper, pop cans and rifle shells often dot the campsites and side canyons” (Farmer 175-176). In destroying the landscape by covering it with our garbage, we are leaving an ugly, indelible stain on the environment. While the Anasazi Indians, the first inhabitants of the area, decorated the canyon walls with beautiful pictographs – almost all of which are now underwater – we have chosen to spruce up the landscape with toilet paper and soda cans. Not all of the garbage is visible, however, and we must also be concerned about the debris below the surface of the lake. As Farmer warns, “Out of sight doesn’t mean out of existence: the bottom of Lake Powell is collecting trash” (176). As evidence, one of the lake’s concessionaires “had used the reservoir as ‘an underwater landfill.’ More than a hundred truckloads of trash and a

thousand batteries had been dumped near Lake Powell's five marinas between 1981 and 1990" (Farmer 177). Eventually, this lack of respect for the sanctity of nature will catch up with us. If we turn a blind eye and continue to allow the lake's concessionaires to dump old boat batteries in the bottom of the lake, the acidity of the water will undoubtedly rise to levels that make water sports and swimming dangerous activities.

Not only has Lake Powell degenerated into a landfill for reckless, shortsighted tourists, but Glen Canyon Dam is now useless as a source of hydroelectric power. "The power plant at Glen Canyon Dam currently generates . . . enough power for about three percent of the supply in the six states served by the facility. At the present time, there is a surplus of power on the Colorado Plateau, and more power plants going online within the western region, thus Glen Canyon's power is not needed" (Living Rivers 2). Hydroelectricity went out of fashion years ago, and the dam no longer produces significant power for Western cities.

The project's supporters envisioned an energy-producing machine that would power cities such as Phoenix, Salt Lake City, and Las Vegas, and in its first few years in operation, the dam was valuable as a hydroelectric resource. However, technological advancements in the latter half of the twentieth century have made hydroelectric dams virtually obsolete. "Hydropower dams were the darling of developers in this century's middle decade. They are now essentially irrelevant, but dam lovers don't know it yet" (Brower 181). In the

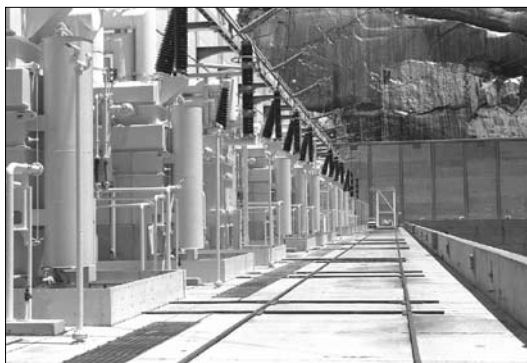


Figure 6. Glen Canyon Dam. The dam's once precious hydroelectric power capability is no longer utilized as a viable energy resource. <<http://www.photo.net/photo/pcd1638/glen-canyon-dam-2.4.jpg>>.

mid-twentieth century, especially between 1930-1970, utilitarian conservationists believed that hydropower dams served two purposes: they provided a valuable source of power and created large storage reservoirs in the arid American West. Now that hydroelectric power is "essentially irrelevant," Glen Canyon Dam no longer fulfills one of its original goals.

Not only does the dam no longer produce hydroelectricity, but it is also collecting vast amounts of silt at its base and storing large amounts of garbage (much of it manmade) in the lake held behind it. As Lake Powell collects more of this silt and as tourists continue to irresponsibly dump their trash in the water, the reservoir will gradually become shallower, and "The economic character of the dam will shift away from producing hydroelectric power and waste storage. The only obvious use for large bodies of shallow water would seem to be recreation" (Wehr 56). Now that Glen Canyon Dam is not a useful source of power, its main purpose is to keep in place the waters of Lake Powell. As the lake becomes shallower, the entire area will serve no other purpose but recreation. Permanently scarring a place as beautiful and rare as Glen Canyon simply to create an enormous playground in the middle of the desert is the prospect that faces us if we continue to ignore the problems associated with the dam and the lake. This idea, that Glen Canyon Dam no longer serves any practical purpose, raises the question of whether or not building the dam was worth the consequences it has had, and pinning down the true value of nature is necessary to determine the answer.

The Wilderness Idea: An Invaluable Resource

Nature is most valuable not as a utilitarian or recreational resource, but as an abstract idea, a spiritual philosophy. As such, nature's importance is fundamentally intangible. Wallace Stegner eloquently explained the value of this intangibility in his passionate 1960 Wilderness Letter, in which he explains that he wants to speak not for "the wilderness uses, valuable as those are, but the wilderness idea, which is a resource in itself. Being an intangible and spiritual resource, it will seem mystical to the practical minded – but then anything that cannot be moved by a bulldozer is likely to seem mystical to them" (Stegner 1). While he recognizes the value of the various utilitarian wilderness uses to the "practical minded," Stegner advocates for his unique conception of "the wilderness idea, which is a resource in itself." In a 1965 letter to David Brower, Thomas Dustin echoed Stegner's sentiment, writing, "The most sublime truth is that one need not actually see it physically, or hear it or touch it or grasp it to know its fundamental value" (qtd. in Pearson 85). This idea – that the elusive qualities of nature are paramount is the crux of the purists' argument for the preservation of natural beauty. As Wehr writes, "The discourse [of the preservationists] is thus focused on nature as an aesthetic and spiritual resource that can benefit humans in important ways outside of economics" (188). In an attempt to counter the utilitarian conservationists' argument that nature can and should be harnessed to provide humans with material benefits that will improve society as a whole, the purists argue that nature's spiritual powers are equally advantageous, but in less obvious ways.

Nature, preservationists claim, has healing powers that have the potential to positively affect every member of society. In our urbanized world, the soothing effects of nature provide a welcome break from the frenetic hustle-bustle of city life. "The reminder and the reassurance that it is still there is good for our spiritual health even if we never once in ten years set foot in it. It is good for us when we are young, because of the incomparable sanity it can bring briefly, as vacation and rest, into our insane lives. It is important to us when we are old simply because it is there – important, that is, simply as an idea" (Stegner 2). Nature's peace and "the incomparable sanity it can bring" afford a different perspective on "our insane lives" and the chaos of modern society. Not surprisingly, these spiritual benefits of the environment were present in the dialogue of the fight over Glen Canyon. As Wehr explains, "The environmental discourse at Glen Canyon was focused on nature as having other forms of value . . . such as the supposed ability of nature to provide respite from urban landscapes and its restorative powers for dehumanized workers and other city-dwellers" (188). Purists argue that it is nature's remarkable ability to temporarily blind us from the problems of society that makes the wilderness worth protecting. In addition, preservationists stress that our actions and decisions with regard to the environment tend to have far-reaching consequences that will affect not just us, but also future generations.

The destruction of the wilderness in the name of utility is a slippery slope and one that, in the long run, benefits no one. Nature cannot protect itself from man's obsessive desire for control, and the damage we inflict on the environment is as psychologically devastating to those who value its preservation, as it is physically injurious to nature herself. "As the wilderness areas are progressively exploited or 'improved,' as the jeeps and bulldozers of uranium prospectors scar up the deserts and the roads are cut into the alpine timberlands, and as the remnants of the unspoiled and natural world are progressively eroded, every such loss is a little death in me. In us" (Stegner 4). The environment is a necessary resource that desperately needs our help in order to survive into the future. We should heed this requirement so generations to come can benefit from nature's sacred

healing powers in the same way that we have. As Stegner recommends, “We need to put into effect, for [the wilderness’s] preservation, some other principle than the principles of exploitation or ‘usefulness’ or even recreation. We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope” (6). If we continue to allow the careless exploitation of nature, future generations will have to clean up our mess and deal with the repercussions of our shortsighted decisions. In addition, they will involuntarily lead lives devoid of the valuable spiritual healing powers that nature possesses.

Drain the Lake, but Leave the Dam Standing

With these thoughts of the future in mind, we must remember that Glen Canyon is not gone; it is merely hidden beneath the waters of Lake Powell. As such, we can restore much of the hidden beauty of Glen Canyon simply by draining the lake. Brower, who finally convinced the Sierra Club to back his proposal to drain Lake Powell in 1995, writes that he “turned from regret to restoration” because, “The fact is . . . Glen Canyon is still there” (182). The optimism of Brower – Glen Canyon’s staunchest and most vocal defender – represents the indomitable nature of preservationists who are determined in their cause to drain the lake. “As surely as we made a mistake years ago, we can reverse it now. We can drain Lake Powell and let the Colorado River run through the dam that created it, bringing Glen Canyon and the wonder of its side canyons back to life” (Brower 180). Though our experiment with Glen Canyon Dam failed, we can fix our mistake. Draining Lake Powell would be a long and complicated process, but it would also be extremely rewarding and fulfilling upon completion, the purists argue. While Lake Powell’s waters should be allowed to run their natural course through Glen Canyon, the dam itself is a different story.

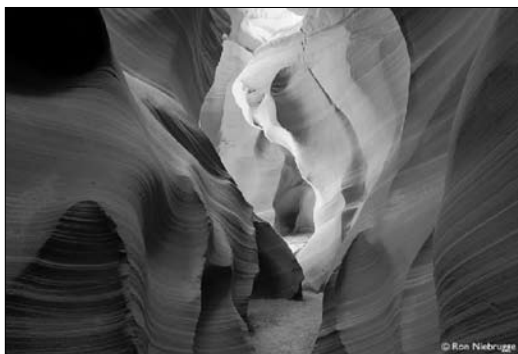


Figure 7. *The Hidden Antelope Slot Canyon*. Ron Niebrugge. <http://www.wildnatureimages.com/A%20to%20C3000/ANTELOPE-SLOT-CANYON.jpg>.

While we have an obligation to drain Lake Powell, Glen Canyon Dam should not be destroyed; instead, it should remain as a landmark. As Brower explains, “We don’t need to tear the dam down, however much some people would like to see it go. . . . The dam itself would be left as a tourist attraction, like the Pyramids, with passers-by wondering how humanity ever built it, and why” (180). Instead of completely removing Glen Canyon Dam from our memory, we should leave it in its place both as a reminder of our shortsighted mistakes and to provide future generations with an example of exactly what *not* to do to the environment. While many people argue that the difficulty posed by draining Lake Powell would outweigh the benefits of re-exposing Glen Canyon, there would be other, more tangible advantages linked to opening up the dam’s release tunnels.

Draining Lake Powell would not only be beneficial to the environment, but it would also be both practical and economically smart. Lake Powell now serves no purpose other

than as an oversized bathtub, and as such, draining the lake makes sense on many levels. As Brower proposes, “Lake Mead’s Hoover Dam can control the Colorado River without Lake Powell and can produce more power if Powell’s water is stored behind it – saving massive amounts of money, water, and wild habitat. Economics and ecology are ready to team up on this one” (181). Draining Lake Powell, purists argue, would be economically profitable because it would allow one dam (Hoover) to serve the purpose of two (Farmer 182). In addition, if the waters of the Colorado were allowed to pass freely through Glen Canyon Dam, western states would see their water resources increase. As Brower explains, “Draining Lake Powell means more water for the Colorado River states and Mexico, especially Colorado and Utah” (183). Draining Lake Powell has both tangible and intangible benefits, and the proposition should appeal to both utilitarian conservationists and purist preservationists. The economic and practical benefits of draining the lake appeal to the conservationists, while the reemergence of the wonders of Glen Canyon would appease the preservationists.

The End of Lake Powell: A Lofty – But Not Unattainable – Goal

Today, the plan to drain Lake Powell is a hot-button issue in the American West, particularly in states immediately affected by the area, such as Utah, Colorado, and Arizona. Of course, the fight still pits the same two opposing sides against each other: the utilitarian conservationists versus the purist preservationists. The practical minded argue that the proposition to drain Lake Powell would involve legal disputes that might never be settled. As Farmer writes, “Glen Canyon Dam may be necessary on paper only, but that paper is a set of treaties, laws, and legal precedents governing the use of the Colorado River, the most intensively litigated river in the world” (183). The legal issues surrounding Glen Canyon Dam are complicated and wide-ranging. As such, disparate groups of people from varying backgrounds would have to work with each other in order to eliminate the barriers preventing the draining the lake. As Farmer states, “It would require the combined initiative of citizens, politicians, and bureaucrats, and some heroic cooperation over water rights, historically one of the most contentious issues in the American West. At the same time, it would probably require a reform of the way westerners use water – limiting growth and getting by on less” (183). While this cooperation would be hard to achieve, it is an admirable goal that we must strive for if we hope to one-day drain Lake Powell. Opponents of draining the lake point to both the intense litigation linked to the dam and the recreational benefits of Lake Powell.

Defenders of the lake argue that not only does the area provide unparalleled recreational opportunities that should not be eliminated, but also that preservationists do not appreciate Lake Powell’s upside. As Farmer writes, “Anti-dam activists generally fail to appreciate the importance of Lake Powell to others. . . . They do not respect the recreation that goes on there” (187). In addition, Farmer recognizes the same “bizarre and somehow exciting” beauty of Lake Powell that Stegner appreciated during his visit to the area, explaining that, “No one would mistake it for a wilderness experience, or even a nature experience, but houseboating with family can have its own deep meaning” (187). While jet skiing or waterskiing on Lake Powell does not produce the same spiritual refreshment as an escape to the remote, untouched wilderness, it nonetheless is important to a large section of the population.

On the other side, preservationists argue that Lake Powell is a waste of water and that draining it would be economically profitable. In an attempt to broaden their appeal,

purists appealed to the utilitarian side of environmentalists, citing the extraordinary waste of water and significant profit loss that occurs as a result of the dam. Farmer explains that, “Eight percent of the Colorado River disappear[s] at Lake Powell through evaporation or percolation. Considering the going (and projected) price of water in the metropolitan West, this missing water represents millions, even billions of dollars” (183). Preservationists argue that draining the lake would eliminate the undesirable waste of water and economic loss. According to Brower, “The highest economic use of the river would be to let it run free in Glen Canyon” (Farmer 183). In addition to economic reasons, purists defend draining the lake on moral grounds.

Just as supporters of the lake argue that dam-haters do not appreciate the value of Lake Powell’s recreational opportunities, preservationists claim that lake-lovers do not understand the divine properties of nature. “Most members of the pro-lake camp don’t appreciate – perhaps can’t fathom – the depth of this ‘spiritual’ feeling” (Farmer 187). Purists also argue that not only would the draining of Lake Powell be economically profitable, but it would also be spiritually lucrative. “Whatever the final details of Lake Powell’s water losses turn out to be, the draining of the lake simply has to happen. The river and the regions dependent on it . . . can no longer afford the unconscionable loss of water. We need to get rid immediately of the illusion that the only way to protect water rights is by wasting water in Lake Powell” (Brower 183). This idea – that we have a moral obligation to drain Lake Powell – demonstrates the fierce determination of the preservationists, who will stop at nothing to achieve their goals. As Brower urges, “The sooner we begin, the sooner lost paradises will recover – Cathedral in the Desert, Music Temple, Hidden Passage, Dove Canyon, Little Arch, Dungeon, and a hundred others” (qtd. in Farmer 183). In using unwavering language indicative of their stance on the issue, purists act as if the question is not *if* Lake Powell will be drained, but *when*, and it is this attitude that gives the preservationists such a powerful voice.

Lake Powell has its benefits: it is beautiful in its own right, it is one of the greatest water playgrounds in the world, it has made a breathtaking part of the country more accessible to visitors, and it brings in five hundred million dollars per year in tourism revenue. What lies beneath the lake’s placid waters, however, is a combination of natural and spiritual beauty that cannot be found anywhere else on earth. In the pre-dam days, Glen Canyon offered its visitors salvation and an awe-inspiring escape from the ordinary. In order to restore the incomparable beauty that Glen Canyon offers its visitors, we need to drain Lake Powell. When we do so, as Brower writes, “The candle conservationists lit to remember the things lost in Glen Canyon can be put back on the shelf, and, let us pledge, be left there. In time, Glen Canyon will reassert itself, through the action of wind and water. . . . Once again, for all our time, the river can run through it” (183).