

Canyon solutions

Wilderness advocates who want to ban motorized boats from the Grand Canyon are reaching for a brass ring that probably always will elude them. Sadly, in their over-reaching, they are foreclosing possible policy changes that could improve the experience for all inner-Canyon visitors.

More specifically, some "talking points" floated by the Grand Canyon Trust deserve to be discussed and debated, not dismissed out-of-hand as seems to be happening. The trust remains officially opposed to all motorized boats on the Colorado River in the Canyon. But its talking points suggested allowing motorized boating in exchange for a gradual switch to electric motors, an end to helicopter shuttles for rafters and wilderness designation for 94 percent of the park.

Wilderness advocates, however, appear to be following an everything or nothing strategy. They want to ban all motorized rafts, replacing them instead with oar-powered rafts. They are deluded, however, if they think they have a chance of actually causing this to happen.

Currently, about 20,000 people a year float through the Canyon on the Colorado, some of them on motorized rafts, the remainder in oar boats.

Environmentalists are right, of course, that the motorized boats are more noisy than oar boats. But the difference is not as great as one might think, especially since concerns about the noise and pollution led outfitters to switch from two-stroke to four-stroke engines, which run quieter and cut emissions by 90 percent. Some outfitters are also experimenting with electric engines that would be even quieter and have no emissions.

As it is now, rafting through the Canyon on a motorized boat is not a true wilderness experience. But it still is an awesome, sublime experience, despite the putt-putt of the raft's small, 15-horsepower outboard motor. For that matter, hiking in the cross-Canyon corridor created by the Kaibab and Bright Angel trails is not a wilderness experience, either, but for many hikers it is a trip they will remember forever.

The underlying issue at the Canyon is a tradeoff between wilderness and accessibility. So far, officials have reached a fair balance, even though at the Canyon's center, they currently emphasize accessibility at the expense of wilderness. That is only appropriate at one of the Earth's natural wonders, visited annually by millions of people from around the world. It is also appropriate that accessibility is emphasized only in the relatively small central corridors of that natural wonder.

Some environmentalists complain that motorized rafts and helicopters ferrying big groups of rafters through the Canyon can disturb wildlife. But park officials say there is not much evidence of environmental harm from current levels of use. Nor is there much difference in the safety records of oar-powered and motorized rafts.

The issue ultimately is one of politics. It is unlikely that the last Congress, even with Bill Clinton as president, would have approved eliminating motorized boats from the Canyon. It is even less likely that this Congress, with George Bush as president, will outlaw motorboats. Given that reality, the talking points from the Grand Canyon Trust appear even more attractive. This is the time for environmentalists and commercial outfitters to come together to seek workable solutions.

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