

High Country News

For people who care about the West

Exploring the shrinking marvel of Lake Powell

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I grew up thinking of Lake Powell as sacred in the way that a mass grave is sacred. But I'm also a practical person, and I see the lake as a giant highway offering access to some of the most spectacular country in the West. It was the practical side that agreed when my wife suggested spending three days sea kayaking the lake for our anniversary.

The last time I saw the reservoir was 20 years ago, when I was 17 and my friends and I called it Lake Foul. After getting snowed out of a backpacking trip, we headed toward the dammed-up Colorado, over a bumpy road to the lake. One of the first things we saw after reaching the still water was a dead cow, submerged, its legs sticking cartoonishly out of its bloated body.

This time we embarked from a gravelly beach in loaded-down kayaks: No cows, alive or dead. Then, prodded by an old guidebook's promise of a canyon, a campsite and a glorious hike, we paddled past the pain in our shoulders and up a half-drowned, serpentine canyon. We paddled beyond my fears of the depths and the cow-eating catfish lurking in the murk among the skeletons of old cottonwoods; past a houseboat as big as a doublewide, a rainbow-colored Gay Pride flag snapping in the wind behind it; and we mingled with some young motorboaters, who liked to use their concert-magnitude sound system to test the acoustics of the canyon with bass-heavy, chest-vibrating hip hop.

Which, really, was perfect. But when we got to the end of the canyon, here's what we found: A grotto of steeper-than-vertical cliffs. Somewhere up top was the guidebook's perfect campsite, but it was impossible to reach except by helicopter. The guidebook, though, wasn't wrong. The lake was wrong.

It turns out the author of our guidebook conducted his initial reconnaissance of the lake in 1988, before the drought hit with full force, and one dry year after another left the lake draining like a bathtub. By 2004, the lake's surface had plummeted to an elevation of 3,570 feet, or some 130 feet lower than it was when my friends and I gleefully watched crawdads devour that bloated bovine's eyeballs. As a result, all the prime campsites and hiking spots and canyons are not where they were, in relation to the lake, a decade ago.

In fact, we had to paddle all the way out of the canyon and back down-lake before we found a place flat enough to set up our tent. The storm arrived not long after: We knew it was coming because it was only Saturday afternoon and the boat traffic was all heading back towards the marina, and because the sky around the Henry Mountains was black, illuminated periodically by lightning.

Hunkered down in our old Wal-Mart tent, its leaks held at bay by an old tarp bungeed to the top, we listened to the rain pour down on the rocks and a flash flood roar nearby. I

envisioned the same thing happening all around the lake, even all around the Colorado Plateau -- raindrops gathering and flowing into the rivers and then into the lake. I envisioned it rising up, lifting up our kayaks, and carrying them away.

But when we awoke, the lake seemed not to have risen a bit. The storm had tripled the size of the Colorado River near Moab. Little arroyos became torrents overnight. But all of that water could only raise the lake by about four inches, most of which was lost over the next week. Since 2004, similar downpours have been common, and we've had at least one big winter. But the water has come up only 30 feet.

Theoretically, this means that the reservoir could be full again in just 10 more years. But it's not likely. During the last decade, the water flowing into the lake has been consistently below the 45-year average; the outflows -- needed to generate power and supply downstream users -- have remained the same. It would take a sopping-wet decade to fill up Lake Powell again.

A lot of people want to take the dam down, from respectable professionals to raving eco-terrorists, for whom breaching the dam is the act that will lead them to their own version of a martyr's paradise: A place in the plunge pool of Cathedral in the Desert surrounded by 72 buff hippy chicks. Nature will probably beat them to the punch, however, slowly draining the lake and returning it, over centuries, to what it once was -- a river.

Jonathan Thompson is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News (hcn.org) in Paonia, Colorado. He becomes the paper's editor on Nov. 5.

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