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Glen Canyon Dam: 50 years of controversy

Environmentalists say Lake Powell's future is a dry one, but others say they're all wet

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PAGE, Ariz. - Fifty dam years. Make that "50 Dam Great Years."

Yep, the city of Page - on the lip of Glen Canyon and dubbed "the town the dam built" - is throwing itself a birthday party Friday and Saturday.

But some environmentalists, charting the receding waters of Lake Powell, wonder whether Page will live to see 100.

Once described as the most desolate place in the contiguous 48 states, the camp where construction workers bivouacked in dusty trailers in 1957 now is an oasis complete with churches, schools and parks - a sliver of lush green splashed upon a breathtaking landscape of burnished sandstone. And the 7,000 full-time inhabitants of this tourist hub on Lake Powell's picturesque Wahweap Bay are pretty "dam proud."

"We're like any other small town," says longtime Page resident and booster Joan Nevills-Staveley as she strolls along manicured Lake Powell Boulevard, "except we have this tremendous swimming pool out our back door."

Lake effect

It's difficult to talk about Page without considering the 186-mile-long reservoir named for explorer John Wesley Powell. About 3.5 million visitors take it in each year, spurring tourist economies in southern Utah and northern Arizona.

Eventually, though, Lake Powell discussions flow to the controversy that has backed up - along with the muddy waters of the Colorado River - against Glen Canyon Dam since its completion in 1963.

A political tide aimed at damming the Colorado and its tributaries coursed through Washington, D.C., in the 1950s, recalls Ken Sleight, a southern Utah environmentalist and former river runner who was immortalized as Seldom Seen Smith in Edward Abbey's anarchist primer, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

Sleight and a handful of critics warned that the dam would come at a huge price, burying what he calls "the heart" of canyon country, including such natural wonders as Cathedral in the Desert, Music Temple and Gregory Natural Bridge, beneath Lake Powell's waters.

"The momentum grew and grew, and then it became necessary to build the dam. It's like the Iraq war. Once you get so far, it's hard to back down," Sleight recalls while sipping coffee at his ranch south of Moab. "When they flooded Glen Canyon, they killed all those things I loved."

Nearly five decades later, burgeoning demands on the Colorado coupled with dire forecasts about global warming equal a big question mark for the future of the river that is the lifeblood of the Southwest. Uncertainty about upstream flows and the population explosion downriver make the crystal ball for Lake Powell's future murky indeed.

Fifty years from now, there will be no reservoir upstream from Page, predicts Richard Ingebretsen, the founder of the Glen Canyon Institute who views the dam as an ecological disaster.

"The dam will be there, or it won't be there," he says while surveying the partially revealed Cathedral in the Desert on the reservoir's Escalante arm. "But with the overuse of the water and global warming, Lake Powell won't be here."

If that prediction proves true, Page is sunk.

"It would end up a ghost town," Nevills-Staveley says. "But I don't think that will happen. I'm an optimist."

Nevills-Staveley, whose father was the first commercial river runner in Glen Canyon, sees a bright future for her city. Fifty years hence, she says, Page will be thriving with a population twice what it is today. Its 1,600 motel beds may double as well.

"As long as people can get to the water - they may grouse and carry on [about low lake levels] - but they will come."

Pipe dream

It isn't just Page's tourist economy that lies downstream of an uncertain Colorado River. It's the entire Southwest - including Washington County and St. George - that pins the future on the waterway. A planned 158-mile pipeline from Lake Powell would feed the ever-growing population in Utah's Dixie.

The \$500 million aqueduct would deliver 70,000 acre-feet of water annually and double the area's present capacity. (One acre-foot is the amount required annually by a family of four.) The pipeline would nurture growth for decades to come, says Ron Thompson, manager of the Washington County Water Conservancy District.

"If we grow at the rate everyone says, we'd be tapped out [by 2020] without it."

Portentous predictions about low Colorado flows don't faze the veteran water manager, who has watched the desert alternatively bake and flood through the years.

"If you look at the long-term average of Lake Powell, it looks to me like there's very little risk," Thompson says. "Even if you get a decrease in snowpack, global warming means you get some wet years."

The St. George pipeline would, for the first time, bring Lake Powell water to Utah communities. The reservoir may be located in the Beehive State, but it offers little to Utahns in the way of municipal or agricultural water. Rather, it has served as a reserve for Lake Mead, downstream near Las Vegas.

"There is no water flowing uphill to Grand Junction, Colo., or Moab, Utah," explains Barry Wirth, spokesman for the federal Bureau of Reclamation, which built and maintains the dam.

What Glen Canyon Dam has done, he explains, is provide funding through the sale of hydroelectric power to underwrite water projects in Utah and its upper-basin neighbors, Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico. Eight of 16 dams funded, in part, by Glen Canyon Dam power are located in Utah, including Flaming Gorge, Jordanelle, Steinaker and Starvation.

Recent dry years - with the exception of the winter and spring of 2005-06 - show Lake Powell is functioning as planned, Wirth says. It stores water in wet periods to help cover dry spells and allows upper-basin states to meet obligations of the 1922 Colorado River Compact to their lower-basin partners.

Water released from Lake Powell travels down the Colorado to Lake Mead, impounded behind Hoover Dam. Mead is vital to the lower basin - Arizona, California and Nevada - where the population is expected to swell by the millions in the next decade.

"The system," Wirth says, "is more important now than it's ever been."

Is less more?

Nonetheless, Wirth concedes, Southwest growth will keep Lake Powell lower than in the past.

"It's going to fill less frequently because there is more [water] demand."

Ingebretsen, on the other hand, contends such observations are an understatement.

"The latest, very conservative data, using Bureau of Reclamation [global-warming] models, shows it will be

empty 15 [percent] to 50 percent of the time. Over the next 25 years, there is a good likelihood Lake Powell will be empty." "

Such a scenario could wither St. George - if it grows to depend on the planned pipeline.

"If they build it," Ingebretsen warns, "there may be no water to pump."

It all speaks to the folly of damming the Colorado, observes Sleight, the one-time river runner.

"The dam could be a monument to man's stupidity," he says. "Fifty years from now, Lake Powell will be gone. The canyon will come back. It's just a matter of time."

Critics such as Sleight and Ingebretsen would not exactly be welcomed with open arms in Page - especially during this week's big celebration.

"You'd like to do them in," says Nevills-Staveley with a smile. "This [city] has been my dream for a long time."

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About the 1922

Colorado River Compact

*** Divides the Colorado River into upper and lower basins. (Upper-basin states: Utah, Wyoming, New Mexico, Colorado; lower-basin states: Arizona, California, Nevada.)**

*** Gives the right to 7.5 million acre-feet of water to each basin annually. (An acre-foot is the amount needed annually by a family of four.)**

*** Ensures upper basin will not deplete flow to lower basin below 75 million acre-feet over any 10-year period.**

Environmentalists fight the dam

*** David Brower, Sierra Club president, publishes *The Place No One Knew* in 1963. The book about the flooding of Glen Canyon Dam helped spawn the modern-day conservation movement.**

*** Ken Sleight and Friends of the Earth unsuccessfully sue the Interior Department in 1970 when Lake Powell backs up under Rainbow Bridge National Monument.**

*** Edward Abbey publishes *The Monkey Wrench Gang* in 1975 in which characters plot the destruction of Glen Canyon Dam.**

*** Richard Ingebretsen founds the Glen Canyon Institute, aimed at decommissioning the dam, in 1996.**

Source: U.S. Department of the Interior

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