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Tribal consultation river trip at Grand Canyon National Park brings together tribal representatives and federal agencies to discuss issues of mutual significance

Grand Canyon, Ariz. - From August 20-28, 2007, the National Park Service (NPS) and the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) led a tribal consultation river trip along the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon.

During this river trip, discussions focused on how to make tribal consultation more relevant and timely; how to better integrate tribal concerns and perspectives into park management; how to include tribal scholars into project work and treat them on the same level as non-tribal scientists; and how federal agencies can continue to be responsive to tribal needs.

"These tribes all have their origins and histories in the Grand Canyon," said Jan Balsom, Grand Canyon National Park's chief of cultural resources, who helped lead the August consultation river trip. "We can't effectively care for the resources unless we understand and take into consideration the tribes' perspectives."

One of the most significant topics discussed on this river trip was how the NPS and other public land agencies that conduct work at the Grand Canyon, such as the Reclamation, can enter into formalized agreements to allow tribes more direct involvement in management activities at the Grand Canyon. These agreements would be developed between each of the affiliated tribes so that their interests would be better represented.

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In addition to discussions on how to make tribal consultation more effective, the tribes were conferred with on various river-related issues within the park, such as the Colorado River Management Plan, and implementation of an archaeological treatment plan for 151 sites most affected by Glen Canyon Dam. The NPS and Reclamation are in the process of developing a treatment plan for these 151 sites, which have lost some of their integrity and stability in large part due to the continual sediment depletion over the past 30+ years of dam operations.

The sites at greatest risk from erosion will be excavated by archaeologists in the next few years, while some of the other sites will be protected in place by building check dams to reroute drainages away from the ruins, planting vegetation to help stabilize the sites and keep them from eroding further, or diverting hiking trails, so that people are directed around the sites and not through them.

“We also want to increase tribal involvement in the treatment of these archaeological sites,” said Balsom. “An integral part of our plan would be to bring tribal scholars to the canyon to have them take part directly in the research and interpretation of these sites.”

A majority of the tribal representatives are supportive of what the NPS and Reclamation are doing to protect the archaeological sites, even if these protective measures include excavation to save artifacts from being eroded away and the human history these artifacts have to share from being lost.

“It is important that we maintain an open dialogue with all interested parties to make sure that we do the right thing with these sites,” said Balsom.

“The tribes have an interpretation of sites that a European-American archaeologist, like me, would not think of,” said Mike Berry, regional archaeologist with the Bureau of Reclamation. “This trip was a very rewarding experience.”

There are 11 tribes who have ancestral ties to the Grand Canyon. In addition to representatives from the NPS and Reclamation, representatives from the Las Vegas Band of Paiute Indians, the Pueblo of Zuni, the Moapa Paiute Tribe, the Kaibab Band of Paiute Indians, the Navajo Nation, the Hualapai Tribe, the Hopi Tribe, the Yavapai/Apache Nation, and the Environmental Protection Agency were in attendance on this river trip.

“I truly enjoyed meeting the tribal representatives and hearing their concerns, as well as their willingness to help us through this process,” said Palma Wilson, Grand Canyon National Park’s deputy superintendent of operations, who was also on part of the August river trip. “I am looking forward to working with the affiliated tribes not only on this issue, but others of mutual interest.”



Above photo: Tribal consultation river trip participants look at one of hundreds of archaeological sites found along the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. Photo courtesy of Darren Daboda, Chairman, Moapa Paiute Tribe Business Council.



Above photo: Tribal and federal agency representatives at the end of the eight-day river trip through the Grand Canyon in August. Photo courtesy of the Hualapai Department of Cultural Resources.

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