

**Case Study: The Colorado River through Grand Canyon National Park**  
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The Colorado River through Grand Canyon National Park provides a combination of thrilling whitewater adventure and magnificent vistas of a remarkable geologic landscape. Over 1.1 million acres of Grand Canyon is proposed for wilderness designation, and approximately 12,900 acres along the Colorado River have been identified as potential wilderness due to existing motorized use and boundary issues.

Recreational use of the Colorado River began in 1949 and increased exponentially since the Glen Canyon Dam was constructed in 1963, allowing for year round river running. River use grew from 2,100 in 1967 to 16,500 in 1972. By 1988, 22,000 visitors were taking river trips each year. Early NPS river management focused on safety and access was limited to those with “experience”. The increase in use along with dam operations caused noticeable changes to the ecosystem including adverse effects on cultural resources and riparian vegetation.

Glen Canyon Dam, located 15 miles upstream of Grand Canyon National Park, is depleting the Colorado River ecosystem of sediment, the main ingredient of camping beaches. Since 1983, the size and number of camping beaches in the river corridor has declined. The size, number, and the distribution of camps is the key factor in determining how many trips “fit” in the river corridor at one time and how many people per trip “fit” on the campsites.

The presentation will provide an overview of how the NPS packaged a range of alternatives limited by the physical conditions and distribution of camping beaches in the 278-mile river corridor. Other factors determining the appropriate use levels are based on 1) the number, types, and condition of natural and cultural resources, and 2) desired social conditions including opportunities for solitary or social experiences. The presentation will include detail on how variables such as daily launch limits, group size, trip length, and user-day limits are managed to protect park resources and achieve visitor experience goals.

The 2006 Colorado River Management Plan sets use limits and implementation strategies that represent a significant change from previous management plans. The plan allows for an overall increase in use by establishing daily launch limits and distributing use throughout the year. The plan also reduces group size, increases number of noncommercial trips and provides for a six-month no motors period.

Grand Canyon is often times looked upon as setting the pace or example for how other parks or river management agencies prepare and implement river management plans. For better or worse, richer or poorer, there are lessons to learn.