

“ Payback Time ”

or "Cheer and Loathing on a Beautiful Day in the Southwest".



Boat ramp at Hite Marina on the Colorado River in Utah.

Organic. That's the word I gravitate towards when I think of the landscape of southern Utah. A myriad of canyons, incised into bands of vermilion, mauve, ivory, ochre and chocolate -- rocks from the depths of time in living color. It's a fractal place, if there ever was one. Big gorges branch into smaller gorges. They, in turn, divide into even smaller canyons, subdividing and subdividing, right down to the seemingly microscopic level. Life forms of all sizes cling to those tributaries, however big or small, as those very furrows are the arteries of water, the lifeblood of this high desert plateau. The panorama is rumped, folded, and convoluted, like some kind of living tissue — like a dissected brain of gigantic proportion.

Just recently, I drove north along one such magnificent artery: White Canyon. There the road skims over surrealistically-shaped Permian sandstone ledges, and I was just beginning a long awaited August vacation. I looked from my speeding vehicle down into the winding chasm I was paralleling, hoping to catch sight of some ancient *Anasazi* ruin, that (of course) no one had ever noticed before. That highway, which runs between the "middle-of-nowhere" towns of Blanding and Hanksville, is among the most inspiring drives I have ever seen. That I could spot some prehistoric cliff structure was not impossible. There are plenty in those canyons. There used to be a lot more.

I crossed several bridges, looking down into overgrown streams below. Even there, the rich smell of murky stream water in the hot sun reminded me of the life-giving power now barely flowing beneath the steel girders. A cobalt sky overhead only accented the scene. Now the road wound up and up, away from the water, through immense vertical cuts in the rock strata, blasted and carved away to oblige the road -- as if to enforce upon us all the fact that humans can do anything once they put their minds to it.

High above the Colorado River, the biggest artery in the plateau, is one of the most expansive viewpoints anywhere. I got out of my car, as I always do at that spot, ready to bask in the vista for a few moments. I walked over to the edge, and took a look down.

Unprepared for what I saw, I gasped (it was only a short one), and then a big, wide smile started to break across my face. I almost started to jump up and down with delight. There you go, boys. Try water-skiing on that. What goes around, comes around.

Far below, where wakes from motorboats and "personal watercraft" once crisscrossed Lake Powell, lay mudflats — miles and miles of mud, baking in the sun. I couldn't believe it. In all my years of driving back and forth across the American West, I had never seen

anything like that. I thought again of that idea of "humans being able to engineer anything". *Now, really?*

Do we really think we can just remake Earth's surface without consequences?

There is probably no greater symbol of the defacement of the American West than "Lake" Powell, which is actually a reservoir. It is formed behind Glen Canyon Dam, the concrete wall that stands further downstream in the way of the relentless Colorado. And there is probably no greater insult to a true nineteenth-century American legend, the first explorer of Glen Canyon, than to have his name affixed to what he surely would abhor. John Wesley Powell must be rolling over in his grave, yet smiling, too, at the cubic miles of mud and silt accumulating in Glen Canyon, and he would probably say to us now, "I told you so." At least *he* got to see its splendor. So the symbol is not a mark of progress, after all. It is a symbol of hubris, indeed, even death.

In my picture, you can see what looks like a long, sloping runway above the mudflats, below the cliff. That is the huge boat launching ramp of the now-closed Hite Marina. Or *was* the ramp, I should say. The reservoir is almost 100 feet below "full pool", and therefore lies hundreds of feet *from the bottom* of that ramp. A result of drought in the West, this situation will almost certainly get worse, for the foreseeable future anyway. Combine that with the fact that when you block a river as muddy as the Colorado, lots of silt drops out of suspension, and it starts to build up. All of that grayish sludge you can see now is covering a lost world.

These realities will render Glen Canyon Dam *useless* -- for either storing water, or for generating electric power. Somehow, people just don't get it -- how fast it is happening here.

Those motivated by politics would have us all believe that dismantling the dam is some wacko idea, selfishly promoted by those awful environmentalists. That the aforementioned are so skilled at calculated nuance and misinformation does little to dismiss the facts.

The Colorado River averages a sediment load of about 100 million tons a year. That's about 30,000 dump truck loads *every day*. And as of the time of this writing, the reservoir is dropping about *one foot every five days!* The drying-up of the reservoir, coupled with the filling-in by silt, means that it is losing on both fronts: from the top down, and from the bottom up. If you don't believe me, drive there and look for yourself.

Beneath that mud and what's left of the water, are countless archaeological ruins, and the remains of the most intricately beautiful canyon on Earth. By many estimates, present climatic conditions could actually worsen, causing an increase in the rate of the water level's decline. Eventually, the silt accumulation will start to block the dam's outtake portals, making operation of the power generators unsafe. And by then, even more irreplaceable canyon beauty will be lost to the muck.

In recent publications, I have written about the modification of Earth's geology by humans, and how it can be either good or bad. This modification (Glen Canyon Reservoir began filling in 1963), will go down as one of the most calamitous and short-sighted ever.

Besides the above reasons, Glen Canyon Dam should be demolished, and what's left of its reservoir drained, as an admission of our arrogance and conceit in living with nature. Let life return to the landscape. If we had real vision, and cared at all about people yet to come into this world, we would leave them something of magnificence and meaning, not the entrenched wasteland that is inevitable under current policy.

--- *Richard Allen*

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Contact Richard Allen at GemLand ®

602-294-6775

info@gemland.com

www.gemland.com