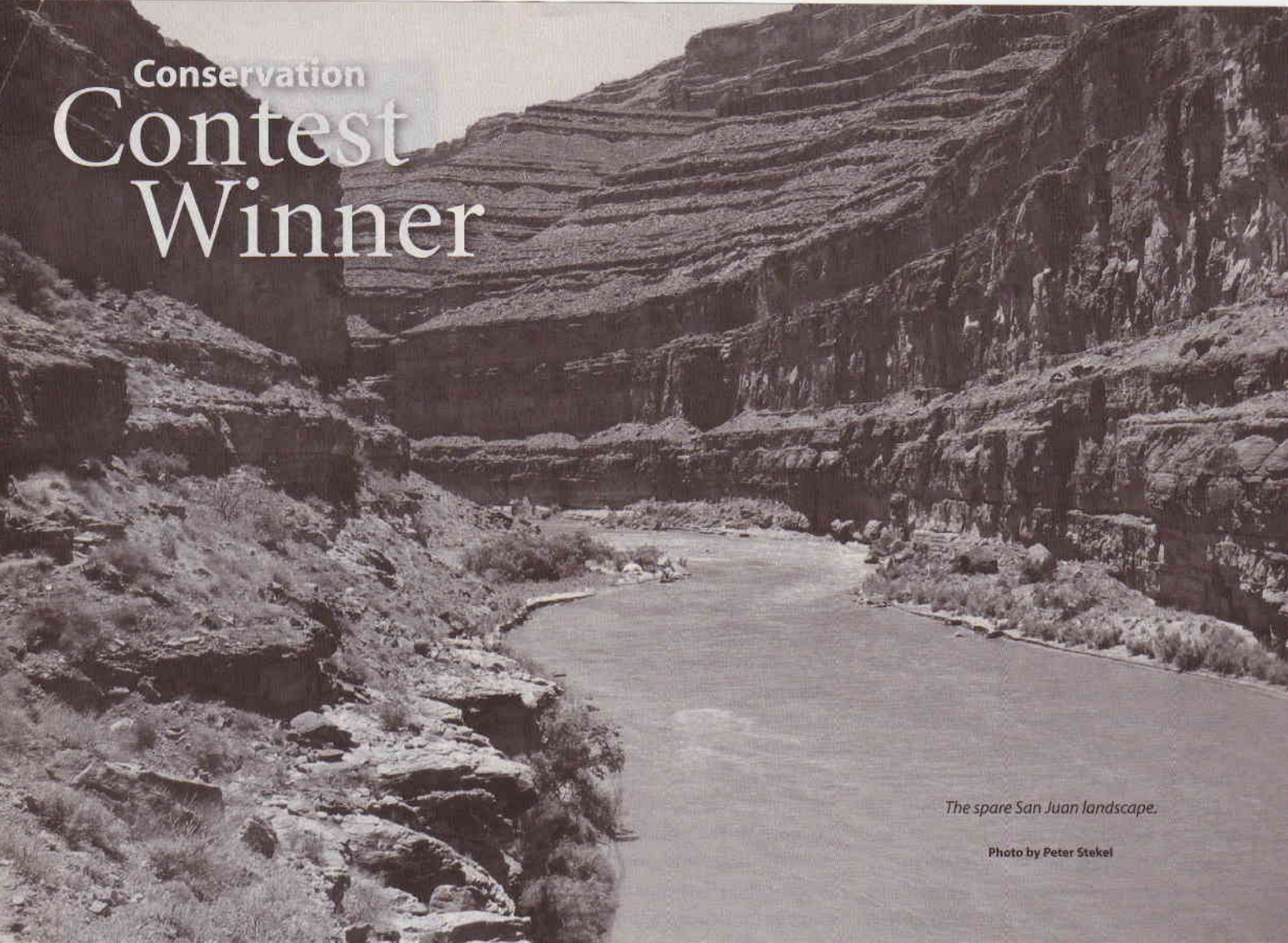


Conservation Contest Winner



The spare San Juan landscape.

Photo by Peter Stekel

The River Rules

By Peter Stekel

The San Juan River starts high in the Rocky Mountains of south-central Colorado. At first it rushes, falls and runs, bouncing with happy energy. Then it slow dances like your prom date dream, oozing and eddying hundreds of miles before one last fling, finally crawling into bed behind Glen Canyon Dam. It's that last piece in Utah, the fifty or so miles below Mexican Hat to the takeout at Clay Hills Crossing, that people love to run in open boats. Once you've been there and felt that last bit of excitement the San Juan has to offer, you'll know why.

Like the Colorado River, into which it should flow, the San Juan is brown. Like chocolate milk. Like a baby's diaper. Like many rivers beyond the hundredth

meridian. The rocks it flows through are red, burnt umber and terra-cotta. Those rocks are made of mud and silt contributed to ancient oceans by primordial Colorado and San Juan rivers.

An untrained eye doesn't see much growing along the San Juan. What little vegetation is poking out of the ground is a faded green, like Levis worn one season too many. The chlorophyll has been blanched out, scalded by the sun until it no longer possesses any botanic hue. All that is left is emotion. To either desert lovers or haters, that green is as refreshing as blue sky on a smoggy afternoon in southern California.

Of course, there's plenty of blue sky in the desert but a bright sun and summer heat do a good job of washing away any interest in it. Shade, dark, cool shade is sought when leaving the river for the canyons. Umbrellas and tarps are needed on shore, substituting for trees. Portable

sun shelters—hats with bigger duckbills than a duckbilled platypus—are needed on the river once flat water has obviated the need for helmets.

Desert sky is benign to those who pay attention and unforgiving to those who forget the importance of escaping the sun. That's the rule to follow on the San Juan and every other river too. When the river rule isn't followed someone always ends up with the worst sunburn seen since the last time denial (or fashion—"I can't wear a hat because it makes my hair look funny") got in the way of good sense.

Humans are a funny lot. Experience and conditioning mean we obey what the sky commands though obedience doesn't come easily. Whoever first came up with, "Rules are meant to be broken," never paddled a river or stood in the desert. To that foolishness can be added the current philosophy that not only are rules meant



to be broken, they're meant to be ignored and not known.

In the San Juan country, the sky above and the earth and river below are good metaphors for knowing and not knowing. Granted, a lot in this world is not known. Some of it because it can't be known and the rest of it because it's just too plain difficult to understand. But a small piece, the lazy piece owned by those who are proud of their ignorance, is purposely unknown because knowing would mean paying attention and being aware. Laziness breeds indolence and makes breaking rules a natural affair.

Rivers continually provide metaphors for how life is to be lived. Rivers have rules and while on the river we choose to obey those rules because we know how important they are. We know the health and safety rules and follow them without question. It doesn't matter if you are novice or expert, everyone respects the rules because everyone knows they are right and good. Make camp in the proper place. Use your fire pan. The river is not a toilet. Wear helmets and PFDs since they protect heads from concussions and keep air in a swimmer's lungs. Always travel the river as if you are the first in a long line. Be invisible and leave no trace of your passing. Pack it in. Pack it out.

Further downstream the rules don't change but everything else sure does. The further from the source, the further from knowledge and awareness. The problem is, not abiding by the rules creates mischief for rivers.

Consider the San Juan's curious reversal of fate. During most of its life, the San Juan River runs brown under a blue sky. As time marches on, the river is captured by the water seekers. The San Juan joins larger and smaller rivers and runs through pipes to fill reservoirs and other impoundments. In the end, it sits blue under a brown sky. Resting in a shady eddy on the lower San Juan, below the rapid at Government Canyon, engulfed by rock, warmth and rule, it is difficult to believe that this water will one day flow from faucets to feed factories and businesses or water homes,

gardens, people and dogs in such places as Los Angeles, Tucson and Phoenix. Because they choose to not know or respect the rules of rivers, the people who use this water will not know where this water came from, or how long and how far it traveled to meet their needs.

These water users will not know that the San Juan is one of the siltiest rivers in the world. One third of the River's volume can be silt during the summer when afternoon thunderstorms pound what passes for rock around here.

Urban water users won't know that egrets, beaver, mule deer, Canada geese, hawks and sparrows and other animal species rely on the river and its basin for life. Even cattle grazing on the public lands around the San Juan for less than \$2.00/animal/month need its water. And don't forget the insects and all the plants.

The lower Colorado River basin states of Nevada, Arizona and southern California will take the San Juan's water without knowing about the 12,000 people who run this stretch of 50 miles every year. That successive waves of people were born here, died here and were supplanted by conflict with different cultures. Or that the wave here now, us, shall some day also pass.

Water takers will not know about the human impacts here on the San Juan and how severe they have been. For instance, Tamarisk, the "scourge of the desert southwest," is an ecological disaster along riparian zones. Introduced from the Middle East to control erosion, it provides scant habitat or resources for native animals. Not only do Tamarisk infections disrupt wildlife, the tree displaces native plants and affects river recreation by creating impenetrable thickets sealing off shore access.

Tamarisk roots draw up water from deep in the ground—water often contaminated with salts. These salts are concentrated in the tree's leaves, which when dropped onto the ground make the soil too salty for any other plant except ... you got it! Tamarisk. Since it uses more water than native plants, an established grove of Tamarisk can

actually lower the water table, drying up springs and wells.

For people resistant to reason, Tamarisk is the perfect desert plant. It's green. It binds the sandy bottoms and shores of rivers, reducing sediment transport so the dams—river plugs—don't silt up. Tourists love Tamarisk because of the tree's springtime display of small, pinkish flowers. They think the hundreds of thousands of tiny feathery seeds, blowing about in the breeze or floating downstream, are pretty. What they don't know is that those seeds, falling on a sandbar, create a carpet of one inch seedlings with twelve inch roots.

Tamarisk also reproduces vegetatively, new shoots sprouting from stumps. They appear



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easily following fire, drought, grazing or mowing. Like a relative who comes to dinner and then won't leave, once you have Tamarisk you have it for good. Or evil.

Nor will the water takers know that water backed up in the Glen Canyon reservoir has caused silt to fill the canyon of the lower San Juan and that navigation at Slickrock Canyon is impeded. The river channel here is some 40 feet below the current river bottom. The Slickrock Rapid is little more than riffles now, its power and glory smothered by silt, which, incidentally, the Tamarisk love. They'll wave at you as you float by.

And the water takers will not know about the people past, present and into the future who's life, employment and recreation is a part of these waters. In the cities of the desert southwest it suffices to know that when the faucet handle is turned, out comes water.

Volumes have been written, and not read, about water in the West—who owns it,

who uses it, how they use it and how who controls water controls wealth and power. Life begins and ends in water. We are, as they say, "ninety-something percent water." Maybe that explains the yin and yang attraction of river runners to the rivers they run. One needs the other as much as the other needs the one in order to survive. For water is spiritual power and, like God, does not advocate for itself. That is for the preachers to do. And the river preachers use their boats, their brains, their pens and politician's addresses along with their hard-earned cash to spread the river gospel and reinforce the river's rules. There is wisdom here and we all know it.

Consider wisdom. It's supposed to come with the ages. From where do rivers come?

Wisdom enables the wise to approach and sustain life. As do the waters of rivers.

Wisdom comes from history and is part of a long chain of events we only pretend to control. Can it not be said that a river is wise

in much the same manner?

As Huck Finn knew so well, a river is history, moving water from the past into the present and through the present into the future.

Wisdom is also drawn from pragmatic channels of knowledge and experience. Rivers come from streams that flow from side channels, cutting through geologic time and exposing past lives and experience.

Wisdom draws itself from the nebulous "aether," that mysterious fifth element which Aristotle believed filled all of space. Water fills all of space on earth, working itself into the cracks between grains of soil or between molecules of air. It flows from the sky as rain. It flows on and in the ground as rivers.

Hiding from the sun is a necessity both on the river and off.

Photo by Peter Stekel



From wisdom flows knowledge and without knowledge we are nothing but particles of protoplasm bumping into each other, unaware of making the same mistakes over and over.

Now, consider the river runners. An odd and motley crew. Judged by their appearance, as they would be in their non-native haunts in the side channels of urban knowledge and experience, they are not much to look at. Therefore, rules of impression dictate that the river runner must be of no consequence.

Ah! But here is a group of people! Doctors, lawyers, accountants, teachers, bankers, engineers, bureaucrats, soldiers, carpenters, scientists, weavers, philosophers and photographers, horse lovers, book lovers,

music lovers and lovers of life. They are, as e.e. cummings once wrote so beautifully, not like, "mostpeople."

Mostpeople curse the rain and find fault with the sun. Mostpeople live their lives like water spilled from a glass. Mostpeople would like to see our nation's wealth funneled into "public-private partnerships" where the public ends up paying for everything while the private reaps the rewards. Everywhere you look, mostpeople are starving public program budgets in preparation for shutting down, outsourcing or privatizing our public lands.

The river runner has become the river's preacher, advocating for a just and good

cause. And having fun while doing it too! Perhaps that is what the temple destroyers, "mostpeople," find so abhorrent about river runners. That they know their will, know their goal, know their desire. And they know how to enjoy themselves while doing it. Nothing can be worse for those living in "quiet desperation" than to see those who are not.

And so, back to wisdom. Isn't wisdom also knowing what you know and knowing when to use it, following the river's rules? With great satisfaction, the San Juan River should be happy to know such wonders exist. And, with this peace, the river flows to the sea. *AWW*

*The river's own preachers,
communing with nature.*

Photo by Peter Stekel

