

Hells Canyon Story, Part IV

(Reader's note: This is the last installment of a four part series which tells the story of how Hells Canyon and its surrounding wild country was saved from dams and protected by permanent legislation in the years which saw the founding and growth of HCPC, 1965-75. Author Brock Evans was the Sierra Club's Northwest Representative at the time, and was a major actor and leader in the campaign from 1967 on.)

What was it really like in 1967?

Looking back on it now through the mists of the years, it seems a bit like an epic. A tale of David and Goliath, great odds faced and somehow overcome, a huge and most unlikely victory snatched from the jaws of total defeat.

Epic I say, because epics, real epics, are not about the deeds of gods and goddesses; these just fly around and do magic as a matter of course. Epics are what ordinary people do, rising to scary and demanding occasions and stumbling through them no matter what. That's what I think our small band was really doing in those early years.

Without knowing it, of course. I can't speak for others then, but I was most often just worried -- 29 years old, anxious, uncertain about to do next, overwhelmed by both the magnitude of the task which lay ahead -- to somehow rescue Hells Canyon—and to also, simultaneously, grapple with the many other problems and issues popping up everywhere else across the Northwest.

I know that's what it was really like because as soon as my brain raises up recollections of those times, my body reacts in the old familiar way: heart pounding, pulse racing, anxiety levels rising... as if some ancient memory-pods are released.

I first came on the scene in mid-1967. From David Brower, who had hired me just a few months earlier, I learned that my "territory" was, literally, everything from the North Pole to San Francisco, and as far east as Yellowstone. Northwest *North America*: from Alaska to the North Cascades to the Oregon Cascades, from the Sawtooths to the Flathead to the Wind Rivers, and every place in between. Since I was the only full-time paid person north of San Francisco, I felt responsible for the fate of Hells Canyon -- at least accountable for putting together a campaign that we all could rally around and have a chance of success. I hadn't yet met anyone from the just-formed HCPC, so except for a small and courageous nucleus of local folks, I felt quite alone.

I had another concern, more personal. I loved the place. From the first time I had journeyed through the Canyon a few weeks before, enchanted by its majesty and beauty, it was as if some old lost chord had been plucked inside. My heart sang to a new kind of music I hadn't even known was there. I loved Hells Canyon, and vowed to give everything in my power to try to save it.

Our campaign had just begun with that Petition of Intervention before the Federal Power Commission (FPC) I filed in August, challenging the issuance of the license to build the dam, arguing instead that the great river should be allowed to run free, forever.

But now what? We were in the case at least, much to the disgust and ill-disguised contempt of the cabal of dambuilders and hangers-on who had dominated river politics in the Northwest for decades. We were there, and now we had to prove ourselves. We had to do well in the case, if we hoped even to just to slow down the dam juggernaut.

The odds were daunting, because everyone knew that the trial judge would eventually issue another dam(n) license to one of the contending parties. I was just a kid; what did I know, compared to the awesome array of political and financial power and bought expertise that dam proponents were bringing forth? We had to do well—raising an issue (wild river) never raised before, and in a hostile forum. We had to just start out, but we also had to have some sort of plan, if we hoped eventually to win.

Our small band, including HCPC leaders, met that fall. We worked out a two-part strategy: the FPC case immediately, the political effort to follow as we gained support.

The FPC case was vital to our hopes, because it would give us time to show the world not only what a beautiful place Hells Canyon was, but also that it was NOT a hopeless lost cause— it could yet be saved.

We knew we had to do much more. Since the legal tools of NEPA and ESA were years off in the future, only a new law could permanently save the great river, and its magnificent setting too.

The odds against the supreme political effort required to do this a seemed even more intimidating than the legal case. Northwest politics were still dominated by the “rivers want to work” philosophy, incomprehensible as that may seem now. Dams were the accepted wisdom; any notion of a ‘wild river’ was heresy. Hostility to anything “preservationist” in conservative eastern Oregon and Idaho was even stronger then than now. Only a few brave local persons like Ken Witty and John Barker dared to buck the conventional wisdom then. Oregon Senators Hatfield and Morse and Idaho’s Len Jordan were firm dam supporters. Idaho’s Frank Church, a conservation hero, seemed possible, but he was very cautious, with an election coming up. The political establishments of both states lined up FOR the dams, and opposed to the upstarts who dared to challenge the existing order.

What to do? First things first. FPC proceedings were re-starting, and we had to put on a strong case FOR a wild river on the Snake. THAT was our one opening, our window to the other world out there -- the world of public opinion. We knew there was such because the struggle over dams in the Grand Canyon was being waged in the national media at the time. We would try to tap into the public outrage about that one.

But how? As I and co-counsel Tom Brucker began to search for potential witnesses for a credible case for a wild river, the enormity of the task seemed daunting. Although we located good witnesses to speak about the river's wildlife and its stunning geology, and persuaded famed scientist Luna Leopold to contribute a seminal work quantifying the economic and social values of a wild river for the first time, so much more was needed.

We also had to be credible about the "electric power" issue, since we had dared to challenge the received wisdom. "You're against this wonderful dam; so what's your alternative? How are you going to provide for the electricity that the Northwest needs?" Large tomes prepared by paid experts were produced by the companies to "prove" that if the Northwest didn't get electricity from this dam, the whole economy would collapse.

We had to answer these claims with something tangible, not conservation, deemed inconsequential then. Only one other possibility presented itself: nuclear power. In those innocent times, this seemed like a good option. Nearly all the early movers and shakers within HCPC itself were Idahoans employed by the ARCO facility in Idaho Falls, so there was strong support. Thus in 1967, the Sierra Club advocated for nuclear power in a court of law!

That was the strategic and human context of those high-stress yet exhilarating times as 1968 began. Not many people thought we could win. But we were young and hopeful, and we were there. We had a chance, and we had seized it.

1968:

*We find a closet ally: FPC professional staff. "Let us take some of the burden of putting on your wild rivers case. We know how to do these things, we have the resources, and we have the credibility."

*FPC proceedings begin in Washington DC. We cannot afford to travel there. I demand public, as well as legal, hearings in the northwest. We get them, in Lewiston and Portland. A huge opportunity to raise our banner and show support.

*I spend the summer of 1968 traveling throughout Idaho and eastern Oregon, attempting to organize strong turnouts -- in Lewiston especially, the "home turf" of the dambuilders. Considerable effort expended persuading an older group of often-defeated veterans of previous battles that we really could win this time.

*At the hearings we held our own in Lewiston, smashed them in Portland. HCPC folks, led by John Barker, Russ Brown, Floyd Harvey, Pete Henault, Jerry Jayne, Russ Mager, and Al McGlinsky in Idaho, Carmelita Holland and Steve Moen in Oregon, do outstanding organizing, speaking, and publicity work. Public opinion becomes aroused, starts to turn.

*I cross examine witnesses by day, am on public TV exhorting the public at night. Power company attorney tries to get me barred from the legal proceedings because I am “too political.” I explain that I am the only one able to do the double duty. Am readmitted.

*We agree again that we need comprehensive legislation. Protect the whole thing, not just the river. But how, and who will be our champion?

*Bad news. Johnson Administration Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall comes out for a dam, and at a different site, Appaloosa. Federal government becomes a pro-dam player.

*Fall elections bring in Senator Packwood, replacing Senator Morse.

1969:

*I travel to Washington DC. Mission: to see if we can get new Nixon Administration to reverse Johnson’s pro-dam position, knocking the government out of the case. Enlist the assistance of Nixon aide John (“I am a fanatic environmentalist, Brock”) Erlichmann. Erlichmann gets me in to see Undersecretary Russ Train. Train comes out against the dams.

* Senator Packwood tells us he wants to save the Canyon. We have found our champion! Potential legislation in the works, not yet introduced.

* The feuding pro-dam titans, public and private power companies, join forces in a remarkable “peace treaty,” together proposing a “jointly owned” dam for the FPC license. Not good news, but it sends a signal that we have a strong case and they have a weak one.

1970:

*April-May Earth Day fervor. Hells Canyon issue moves onto a national stage.

* May: HCPC leaders and I accompany Senator Packwood and NBC film crew on a high-visibility float trip down through the Canyon. When the TV Special later appears, it provokes a huge national outcry against the dams.

*Packwood introduces bill to create a “Hells-Canyon National Recreation Area” according to boundaries, acreage, and criteria we worked out at Granite Creek Campground during the float trip.

* Idaho becomes a “conservation state.” Proposed open pit mine in White Clouds, Hells Canyon dam(s) become major issues in gubernatorial election, pitting pro-development Governor Don Samuelson against conservationist challenger Cecil Andrus. Andrus wins big. Hells Canyon has another champion.

1971:

*Hearings held on Packwood bill. Senator Church comes out against dams. No House counterpart bill yet. Public sentiment swinging our way. Still strong pro-dam sentiment in eastern Oregon. FPC hearings end.

1972:

*FPC trial judge issues his opinion. Unsurprisingly, he grants a dam(n) license to the now-unified applicants. But surprisingly, he says license will not take effect until end of 1975, allowing us three years grace to get our bill through Congress. If we can.

*Legislation to protect forests of Lower Minam River in Eastern Oregon, supported by local Congressman Al Ullman, passes Congress. Since his support is crucial to our Hells Canyon strategy, we are encouraged. Others in Eastern Oregon are motivated to speak out, joining ranks with the brave early ones like Ken Witty, Carmelita Holland, Loren Hughes, and Forest Service employees like Wade Hall.

1973-75:

*Congressman Ullman introduces his own version of the Recreation Area bill. Forbids dams on the Snake, but is weaker in protections for the wilderness on the plateau; allows a road all along the rim.

*I move to Washington DC to head up Sierra Club office there; stay strongly involved, but successor Doug Scott takes up the daily lobbying tasks, does a superb job building support and raising the pressure.

*Hearings on Ullman bill; controversial but we do well in E. Oregon, overwhelm in Portland, thanks to organizing by HCPC and others. HCPC President Pete Henault, is a regular fixture in Washington DC, as is Doug Scott. Cecil Andrus' support is hugely influential.

*December 1974. Congressman Teno Roncalio, D-WY, a strong dam proponent, sees that we have the votes in the House Interior Committee to pass the Ullman bill—and so, walks out, preventing a quorum. The bill fails for that session of Congress.

*We start all over again in 1975, and a new Congress. Intense lobbying on all sides. Under Packwood's leadership, Senate bill passes again. Roncalio still obstructs, but thanks to Ullman and pressure from many others, bill finally passes the House.

*Final bill signed into law by President Ford, December 31, 1975. Snake declared a Wild and Scenic River, Asotin Dam deauthorized, Wilderness Areas created in Seven Devils and Inner Canyon, Imnaha and other tributaries included in the 700,000 acre Recreation Area.

We had won! Done what seemed impossible once. Problems remained, but they were in the future, waiting for the next generation to take on. But now at least, there was something to take on, to fight for: the great river was finally safe, flowing freely forever; much wilderness was protected, and the stage was set for more to come.

