

Salvation for Hells Canyon

Arguing that the continent's deepest gorge is suffering at the hands of the Forest Service, environmentalists are fighting to protect Hells Canyon as a national park.

By Joel Connelly

THE RISING DRONE of an oncoming jet boat resounded through basalt cliffs of the Snake River canyon, shattering the tranquility of early evening and drowning out the low roar of spring runoff waters. In an aquatic version of a fire drill, five river guides dropped dinner dishes and sprinted toward the river bank. They reached the shore ahead of the wake in time to prevent their wooden craft from banging against rocks.

The jet boat happened along last year as Forest Service officials briefed a group of visiting journalists in a pasture above the river. The officials had been making the case that conflicts between motorized travelers and rafters in the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area should not be an issue. With motor sounds, man-made waves, and gasoline smells to underscore his point, Ed Cole, a Forest Service district ranger, acknowledged the obvious: "This is not a wilderness river."

Although the Forest Service likes to make the point that conflicts are not a problem, jet boats are allowed unrestricted access on the 31-mile "wild" portion of the Snake, 67.5 miles of which is a national wild and scenic river, while float boats must acquire a permit. The major difference at Hells Canyon is not so much the designations as the agency that manages the area.

The 652,488-acre Hells Canyon National Recreation Area--which is within the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest--was officially "saved" in 1975, when its designation by Congress ended a quarter-century push by utility companies to build a 600-foot-high dam in North America's deepest canyon. If the company had succeeded, the dam would have been the river's fourth. The three existing dams have destroyed the natural salmon runs and prevented sand from washing down the river, creating boulder fields rather than beaches. Extreme fluctuations in the water level, caused by releases from the dams, also have eroded the riverbanks.

In holding off the fourth dam, environmentalists were forced to make compromises with resource users of the remote 7,900-foot-deep canyon along the Idaho-Oregon border. The U.S. Forest Service, not the National Park Service, was put in charge of the recreation area. Timber harvesting along the canyon rim is allowed in old-growth ponderosa pine forests. The Forest Service has built more than 150 miles of logging roads at Hells Canyon since it became the curator of the recreation area and continues to allow domestic sheep to graze in the canyon, even though conclusive evidence shows that they transmit a deadly bacteria to wild bighorn sheep.

During the 1970s, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game began reintroducing the bighorns, which were nearly eliminated decades earlier by hunting. But since a 1990-1991 die off of bighorns--the second one in the area within four years--the department has refused to introduce any more. Besides sheep, cattle graze along the river, fouling the water with their waste. And the

number of jet boats has increased threefold in the past five years, slowly turning the canyon into a kind of natural boom box. Powerboat engines are faintly heard even from a 7,800-foot high lookout in the Seven Devils Mountains, more than a vertical mile above the river.

Nearly two decades after the national recreation area was established, a new push is on to transform it into a national park and preserve. Last September, the House Natural Resources subcommittee, chaired by Rep. Bruce Vento (D-Minn.), held hearings to evaluate how the Forest Service responded to a 1990 congressional study accusing the agency of poorly managing its national recreation areas. The Forest Service testified that it tries to maintain a wide range of historic uses at Hells Canyon, but representatives of environmental groups and the Nez Perce Indians criticized the agency's management.

"To assume that the spectacular natural, ecological, and cultural attributes of the Hells Canyon country are permanently protected due to its designation as a national recreation area is a grievous mistake," testified Ric Bailey, executive director of the Hells Canyon Preservation Council.

A onetime logger and heavy equipment operator, Bailey has been guiding dories down the Snake River for 15 years. "We are not trying to reform the Forest Service," he said during a float down the river last year. "It is impossible to get them to manage for ecosystems or to see this as a place where people can not only see but feel the wonders of nature. We want to put an agency in charge, the National Park Service, which has not only the staff but the philosophy to protect this place."

In its 1988 National Park System Plan, NPCA recommended transferring Hells Canyon to the National Park Service (NPS) and redesignating the area as a national park. The plan stated that Hells Canyon is a dramatically scenic natural area, one of the world's wonders. It has always qualified for national park status."

Environmentalists envision Hells Canyon as among the last generation of great new national parks in America. Forests of larch, spruce, and fir abound in the canyon, which is one of the best places in the lower 48 states for viewing wildlife: golden eagles circle in the wind currents, and a surviving herd of bighorn sheep graze below cliffs still daubed with paint marking the planned site of High Mountain Sheep Dam. Pacific rattlesnakes live in the grasses near tributary streams and sun themselves, sometimes at eye level, on trailside rocks. Recently, one of Bailey's rafting parties witnessed a cougar chase and bring down a young deer. Altogether, the canyon supports an estimated 349 species of wildlife, including black bears and elk.

Hells Canyon's abrupt elevation changes make for a collision of climate zones. Springtime meadows in the lofty Seven Devils range take on purple and red tones from lupine and Indian paintbrush. A vertical mile below, yellow flowers top the cactus, and poison ivy grows densely along the riverbank and tributary streams. Searing heat drains hikers in midsummer.

Hells Canyon is one of the country's wildest, most difficult-to-reach places. In a horizontal distance of just eight miles, elevations plunge from 9,393 feet on Idaho's He Devil Peak to 1,500 feet at the river and back up to 6,895 feet on Bear Mountain in Oregon. In a heavy spring runoff,

whitewater and whirlpools of Granite and Wild Sheep Rapids can put a knot in the stomach of even the most skilled kayaker.

After rafting Hells Canyon last year, Roger Contor, a 34-year Park Service veteran, reflected: "By whatever standard you apply, this place undoubtedly qualifies as a national park. From the first day, it would outrank all but a few of the existing 51 national parks." Contor, now retired, served as the first superintendent at Washington's North Cascades National Park and later as regional director of Alaska's national parks.

The canyon meets all possible criteria for national park status except, perhaps, for an abundance of political support. National park status for Hells Canyon would bring changes for jet boaters who currently have free rein to travel the Snake River within the recreation area. Park designation would likely eliminate logging and over time put cattle and sheep out of the canyon. Such increased protection is fiercely opposed by officials and residents of surrounding counties, who believe that increased protection would eliminate economic mainstays.

Jet boats, for instance, are a \$22 million industry in Lewiston, Idaho, a city that advertises itself as "the jet boat manufacturing capital of the world." Commercial operators annually carry an estimated 20,000 tourists into the deepest reaches of Hells Canyon.

The slogan "Land of Many Uses," familiar to anyone who has driven into a national forest, proclaims what has been the Forest Service's management philosophy. While many national forests have shifted from development toward recreation, Hells Canyon's management retains the old ways. The Forest Service has catered to economic interests in surrounding towns, particularly after the Reagan Administration in the early 1980s put down an attempt to restrict jet boats in the upper canyon. The Forest Service has thrown together uses that are obviously in conflict, and the only effort the agency has made to cope with Hells Canyon's growing popularity is to build access roads.

Few campsites are established along the Snake River; a rafting party on a busy weekend can be forced to continue for miles. "I've had to row until dark, sometimes with a load of wet passengers, to find a site," says David Sears, a longtime dory guide. Yet, at the mouth of Sheep Creek, the Forest Service bought an old ranch ideally located for overnight stays, only to lease the property back to a livestock operator and jet boat concession.

The Forest Service's most controversial action has been to erect a monument to industrial tourism at the only spot accessible by road on the Idaho shore of the canyon. Pittsburg Landing used to be reached by a precarious track that beat up the few four-wheel drive vehicles that ventured onto it. Now, however, the Forest Service has built an all-weather road accessible to all kinds of recreational vehicles. The effect is jarring. A recreational vehicle park has been punched into a meadow. A newly improved side road leads to a parking lot where a paved trail draws visitors into a grove of hackberry trees that shelter 2,000-year-old Indian petroglyphs.

"This makes me very, very nervous," Contor said as he visited the petroglyphs last year. "I'll tell you what I think will happen. Someone will deface this site with a can of spray paint. Then they'll put an ugly chain link fence around it." His prediction was, regrettably, realized less than

six weeks later. Vandals gouged a series of stick figures into a rock in the middle of the petroglyph site. The vandals were never caught.

During the congressional hearings in September, Samuel Penney, chairman of the Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee, testified that the desecration occurred only after the Forest Service provided easy access to the site. "Obviously, the tribe is opposed to future human encroachment on these significant areas ..."

The Nez Perce Indians, Hells Canyons' first human inhabitants, wintered here until 1877, when the U.S. Cavalry drove them out, a chase that lasted four months and covered 1,000 miles. More than 1,000 prehistoric Indian sites can be found throughout the area. Today, the Nez Perce collect plants for medicines and food at Hells Canyon and use the area for worship. During the congressional hearings, Penney supported transferring the land to the National Park Service. "There can be no price tag placed on the loss of a species or the destruction of habitat," he said. "This outlook does not seem to be shared by the Forest Service.... "

The proposal to put Hells Canyon under National Park Service protection has precedents throughout the United States, including two in the Northwest. In 1938, Franklin D. Roosevelt toured rainforests of the Olympic Peninsula and moved to create a 900,000-acre Olympic National Park. Three decades later, North Cascades National Park was carved out of three national forests.

One key conservationist, however, is leery of the Park Service. When first elected governor of Idaho in 1970, Cecil Andrus declared that more dams would be built in Hells Canyon "over my dead body." Andrus, a Democrat, later teamed up with a pair of Republican conservationists, Washington Governor Dan Evans and Oregon Governor Tom McCall, in campaigning for a dam-free national recreation area. As interior secretary in the late 1970s, Andrus was the Carter Administration's point man in adding 44 million acres in Alaska to the National Park System.

Now, however, Andrus opposes park status for either Hells Canyon or the Sawtooth National Recreation Area in southern Idaho. He argues that national park designations would draw more visitors than these areas can handle. The governor also fears the Park Service as a source of rules and regulations that would impede Idahoans' enjoyment of their outdoors. Andrus is an elk and bird hunter, and he knows that Hells Canyon is prized shooters' terrain.

Advocates of park legislation see only one way of securing political support in Idaho and Oregon. They would designate most of Hells Canyon as a national preserve, a category of national park that allows hunting. But establishing national preserves in Alaska was a compromise not everyone likes.

"Certainly Hells Canyon is a place that has all of the attributes to qualify as a national park, but hunting would be a serious detriment," said Dale Crane, NPCA's Pacific Northwest regional director. "We need to know what parts of the area should be completely protected, and where extractive activities such as hunting could be allowed. The next step should be to ask the Department of the Interior to study these issues so we have a better idea of how best to protect Hells Canyon."

The status quo can count on continued backing from the loggers of Wallowa County in Oregon and a jet boat lobby that employs a former Forest Service river ranger as its lobbyist. With a recently released plan for use of the river, the Forest Service has sought to temper controversy over noise. It plans on alternating weeks of the spring and summer to give jet boats and float boats exclusive use of a 27-mile stretch of river. But the plan has received low marks from both environmental groups and the jet boat lobby. The Forest Service failed to address such questions as livestock grazing or leasing public lands to private concessioners.

A greater vision is clearly needed for this magnificent canyon. In 1967, when public and private power interests dueled over who would build a dam, such vision was supplied by the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. The judge delivered a famous opinion ordering federal agencies to look beyond kilowatts- in determining Hells Canyon's future. "The test is whether the [dam] will be in the public interest," wrote Douglas. "And that determination can be made only after an exploration of all issues relevant to the 'public interest.'" These issues, Douglas said, included not only power supply but the preservation of a wild river and wilderness areas and the protection of wildlife.

The act establishing Hells Canyon as a recreation area stipulates that it should be managed so as to "assure that the natural beauty, and historic and archaeological values of the Hells Canyon Area and the...Snake River...are preserved for this and future generations." Many believe the only way to achieve this end is by creating a national park at Hells Canyon.

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