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Rafters, Jet Boaters Exchanging Broad­sides Over Hells Canyon

Wilderness activists seek curbs on use of the scenic gorge, including elimination of grazing and timber cutting.

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HELLS CANYON NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

The trouble with "saving" the great scenic places of, America is that, like saving money or saving your breath, some things are hard to keep saved. For instance there is Hells Canyon, the steep, grandiose rock gorge cut by the Snake River through the Wallowa and Seven Devils mountain ranges, delineating the border of Idaho and northern Oregon. It is America's deepest canyon, more than 8,000 feet from its highest pine-and-peak edges down to the cactus-and-brush river bottom below.

Back in 1975, Congress rescued the canyon from the hungry eye of dam builders by designating 652,488 acres of Hells Canyon and 70 miles of the Snake River as a National Recreation Area

Yahoo! River floaters--rafters and dorymen--along with backpackers and naturalists, were thrilled. So were the power boaters, whose thundering jet boats navigate the rapids of the Snake and bring 20,000 tourists into the deepest reaches of the canyon. Cattle and sheep ranchers got land-use rights in the deal, and so did timber harvesters.

Now the bargain has soured.

Today, a new push is being mounted by rafters and wilderness buffs to turn Hells Canyon into a National Park and Preserve. Timber harvesting has blighted the high country; they say, and grazing livestock has driven out most wild bighorn sheep. But most of all, growing numbers of jet boats have transformed the narrow, winding canyon into a booming sound chamber of aluminum machines slamming up and down the river.

"Our vision was that this place was going to be protected," says Ric Bailey, a dory guide and director of the Hells Canyon Preservation Council. "We wanted a place where people can go to experience the wonders of nature . . .not something you can easily do over the scream of a 900-horsepower engine."

Bailey complains strongly that jet boaters have unlimited access to the river while rafters are limited to launching five groups per day. And, he argues, the Forest Service management of the river favors grazing, timber harvest and construction of new campgrounds, all of which imperil the canyon's wild qualities.

Recently, Bailey guided a group of journalists and officials of the Seattle-based environmentalist Bullitt Foundation on a dory excursion down the upper stretch of the river, where the white water is the greatest and scenery the most imposing.

The trip was another step in a campaign to generate public support to make Hells Canyon the centerpiece in "the creation of America's last generation of great national parks."

Around the camp kitchen, uplifted by the sensation of remoteness in this deep chasm awash in the emerald color of spring, it is easy to share the wilderness magic of Hells Canyon as felt in the hearts of people like Bailey.

And Roger Contor, too. With a face as leathery as a saddle, Contor beholds the canyon with 34 years experience in the National Park Service, including stints as park superintendent and regional supervisor of all parks in Alaska.

"By whatever standard you apply," says the now retired ranger, "this place undoubtedly qualifies as a national park. From the first day, it would outrank all but a few of the existing 56 national parks."

The next day of the trip, all of the big rapids have been accomplished. The rumble in the canyon is the more familiar city sound of internal combustion engines. If a national park plan caught on, jet boats would face inevitable restrictions, perhaps a ban from the upper half of the river. Grazing and timber would also be eliminated from the park.

Exact terms of any park legislation would be subject to considerable heave-and-pull in Washington, D.C. But Oregon and Idaho backers say the most reasonable proposition, and the only one with a prayer of securing political support in the region, would be to designate Hells Canyon as a National Park and Preserve, a category of national park that would permit continued hunting.

A 340-horsepower Custom Well jet boat pulls into the dory camp at midday and leaders of the Northwest Power Boat Assn. disembark to make the case for their particular pleasures in Hells Canyon.

"There are people who like to explore the outdoors, nature and the mode of transportation they choose is the motor-- its an honest, legitimate choice," says Sandra Mitchell, the executive director of the organization. Twice before in the history of the canyon, jet boaters called on their political allies in government to successfully beat back Forest Service efforts that would have restricted their numbers on the river and their entry into the upper rapids. They are no less determined today.

This white water river is one of the last, and certainly the best, in the West open to jet boating. Unrestricted access, says Mitchell, is "our right. It's a traditional use of this river.... If you want to float, there are plenty of other rivers just to float."

Zooming down the canyon by jet boat proves to be as noisy and jostling as a disco dance, but it is an efficient trip and one can appreciate the skill required to maneuver these large specialty craft through turbulent, narrow waters.

Marty Morache, retired from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, looks back at the wake left by the jet boat. Unlike other motorized vehicles in the outdoors, he notes, the boats do little damage. "I backpacked through here 30 years ago and there has been little appreciable change since," he says.

Caught in the middle of the two groups, Forest Service area ranger Edward C. Cole says he is trying to live up to a law that calls for "keeping Hells Canyon on the wild side." And he says he is "concerned" about the unrestricted growth of jet boat travel, which has doubled in recent years and made nearby Lewiston, Idaho, the jet-boat manufacturing capital of the world.

But in the end, he adds, "the public owns this land . . . and we have to do what is acceptable to the people who want to use it."