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Lake Powell trash brings call for nonmotorized use

By Guest Columnist

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By Andrew Gulliford

Each summer I do penance at Lake Powell for the environmental sins of its visitors. This summer was no exception, as I volunteered to work on a houseboat called the Trash Tracker. Our job: picking up debris in 108-degree heat along 100 miles or so of the 1,900-mile shoreline.

Our team found the usual amount of beer and soda cans, diapers, toys, plywood, pillows, water bottles, fireworks and golf balls. In five days, we picked up almost 50 full bags of trash, though in the oppressive heat we covered less ground than usual.

But this summer, we saw more toilet paper and human feces than we've ever seen before. Just ask Ranger Terry Bell, who had to dedicate some of her time this summer to go on "poop patrol" around the lake to prevent the spread of fecal coliform bacteria.

It seems that a lot of motor-boaters and houseboat users haven't a clue about "Leave no trace" ethics. And throughout the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, which surrounds Lake Powell, recreational mayhem is only getting worse. The lake shore has become a wasteland of weeds, tamarisk, exploded fireworks and fire rings full of broken glass and melted aluminum.

So, after three summers of picking up trash, I've come to a revelation: Forget about draining Lake Powell, or "Lake Foul" as the critics call it. Draining the lake is not happening anytime soon because of the legal water rights of downstream states and Mexico. And there's also the increasing signs of drought.

The writer Ed Abbey wanted to blow up Glen Canyon Dam, but he couldn't get the job done. Back in 1981, EarthFirst! had fun by tossing a large black plastic wedge over Glen Canyon Dam to make it look like the dam was cracked and ready to spill. Nice gesture and a memorable picture, but ineffective.

I'm tired of waiting the 1,000 years or so that it will take before the mighty Colorado River, which drains 243,000 square miles, finally silts up behind the dam and turns it into a huge waterfall. I want Glen Canyon back for paddlers and those who row boats — now.

The speedboat and houseboat crowd have had the lake since it began to fill in 1963, and what have they done with it? They've trashed it. It's time to take Lake Powell back for the kayakers, the canoers, the rubber-raft folks and all the river people who know how to pick up their trash, how to use fire pans, and who certainly know how to poop into

portable toilets called groovers. (They were named after the first river-running toilets, which were .50-caliber surplus ammunition boxes. Sit on one and grooves will be yours.)

I'm not kidding. With a shoreline longer than that of California, Oregon and Washington, why do motorized watercraft — including those insanely loud jet skis that buzz around in circles like angry hornets — control the lake?

I'm raising my canoe paddle. I want to be heard. I want a section of Lake Powell closed to the gas-guzzling, climate-warming motorboat crowd. I want a section just for paddlers, and I think the Escalante arm or the flooded Escalante River section would do just fine. A new industry could be created for shuttling paddlers and their boats into remote canyons.

In honor of all the boatmen who drifted down through the marvels of Glen Canyon before the dam, it's time to take back a portion of it. Here was a place so beautiful that John Wesley Powell wrote on Aug. 3, 1869, "We have a curious ensemble of wonderful features — carved walls, royal arches, glens, alcove gulches, mounds and monuments."

Now, the canyons are flooded and over 2,000 ancestral Puebloan sites and ruins are underwater. We've lost what the eminent Western writer Wallace Stegner called "the incomparable." But solace can still be found amid those red rocks, blue skies and green waters. For too long, environmentalists have shunned the lake. Instead, it's time to embrace it.

The secrets of Glen Canyon are still there. At the heads of the 93 canyons that form the lake, there are hidden springs, tiny pools of water beneath original, Western cottonwood trees or Fremont poplars shimmering green against curved, arching sandstone walls.

There is deep silence and a profound sense of geologic time. Glen Canyon has been lost, but its essence can still be found — not by draining the lake, but by allowing quiet paddles and quiet oars.

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