Mrill Ingram (l), Jeffrey Ingram, and John Weisheit (at the oars) taking in a view from the Green River, Utah. Photos by Tom Martin

In the middle of Utah’s Canyonlands National Park, more than fifty miles of backcountry roads from the closest town of Moab, I stumble across a dance floor. It lies only a few hundred yards from the Green River, and although large parts of the cement floor are covered by reddish alluvial dirt, it looks to be some 500 square feet. That’s a big dance for the middle of nowhere.

The 360-degree panorama is phenomenal: distant horizons with shapely buttes, backdrops of White Rim Sandstone walls, and the Green River itself, flowing quietly but powerfully a short distance away. The dance floor sits
near an old river meander encountered by John Wesley Powell in 1869. He called it “Bonita Bend” after the Spanish word for lovely. The concrete floor was laid years ago (before the national park was established in 1964) to help make Bonita Bend a tourist destination. That plan didn’t work out, but the floor was used for years as part of the “Friendship Cruise,” a Memorial Day boating extravaganza begun in 1958. At its height, more than 600 boats would race from the town of Green River, down the Green to its confluence with the Colorado River, and then power upstream to finish at Moab, a distance of 184 miles.

Low water levels have largely put an end to the motorized boat race, but people used to really party it up at Bonita Bend. Some boaters continued downstream when they reached the Colorado, propelling themselves into the rapids of Cataract Canyon with sometimes tragic consequences. Three people died in 1993 when they entered the canyon’s big rapids.

This dance floor story is one of several I’ve heard over the past few days about ways people have tried to develop Canyonlands. I am on a river trip with my dad and a small group of dedicated river runners and wilderness protectors spanning three generations. I hear about activism for environmental protection in the 1970s, the 1990s, and the 2000s. If there’s one thing that characterizes all the stories, it’s that there’s no resting on laurels. Even “protected” lands face a constant onslaught of proposals to exploit one resource or another, and the stakes are getting higher.

Scientists are inventing terms like the Anthropocene and the sixth mass extinction to describe the eco-geo-bio cataclysm they are seeing in their data, whether they are looking at ice cores, tree rings, ocean currents, atmospheric carbon, or shifting animal and plant populations. A new report from the Zoological Society of London and the World Wildlife Fund states that global wildlife populations have fallen by almost 60 percent since 1970. So how is environmental activism changing? How does the work of someone like my dad, who fought battles to create wilderness in the 1970s, relate to
John Weisheit, Colorado Riverkeeper and conservation director for the organization Living Rivers, has arranged for eight of us to get together on this six-and-a-half-day oars-only river trip. We put in at Mineral Bottom, a boat launch on the Green River about forty miles from Moab, to float the calm waters of the Green to its confluence with the Colorado River, a place some call the "center of the universe." On the fourth day, we enter Cataract Canyon, where we’ll hit whitewater. Our take-out, midday on day seven, is just above Hite, at the increasingly upper limits of Lake Powell.

I say "increasingly," because a decade of drought afflicting the American West has dropped water levels in Lake Powell by more than 50 percent. Hite used to be a marina. Now it’s high and dry. A major geological event is currently taking place in the canyons surrounding the reservoir. Receding lake waters have revealed huge banks of sediment that have buried canyon walls since the mid 1970s. You can now float past these walls (which sport a meters-wide white "bathtub ring") as well as giant plugs of sediment still clogging the canyons.

Most of the sediment banks are covered in green as plants (mostly nonnatives) establish themselves. But even with the dropping water levels, a thirty-mile stretch of still water buries more than half of the original rapids of Cataract. What would it take to move all this sediment out and free the river? And where would that sediment go? Weisheit, who has coauthored a book on Cataract Canyon, has written that the Bureau of Reclamation (the federal agency responsible for building and maintaining western water projects) has long ignored its sediment problem and the looming disaster when the next large flood gets all that sediment on the move.

As Weisheit was growing up, he and his family made multiple trips from their home in Los Angeles to explore canyon country. Lake Powell began to fill in 1963, a process that took seventeen years. In 1973, boating across the
sapphire blue of the reservoir, he saw Indian ruins and cottonwood trees underwater. That’s when he knew that a huge mistake had been made.

“I was immediately hating,” he remembers. “I knew what we’d lost. And I wasn’t raised to not like this stuff. My dad was in utility sales and one of his customers was the Bureau of Reclamation.”

This experience led Weisheit to dedicate himself to working on and defending “living rivers.” He started out as a river guide, and preferred to work on rivers above dams. The section of the Colorado running through the Grand Canyon, he says, is a dead river. When he first encountered the Colorado below the Hoover Dam he wondered, “Why is this water so clear? Why does it smell funny? Where are the beaches and pieces of driftwood?”

Water coming from below a massive dam is indeed vastly different from a living river. Having dropped its sediment load in the still waters of the reservoir, the water comes out from below the dam very cold, clear, and with a different chemical makeup. Weisheit, a coauthor of books and scientific papers about how dams change rivers, offers a constant stream of information about the profound impacts on beaches, fish, native plants, and animals. Unlike dammed waterways, living rivers experience floods, which create beaches, move sediment in and out, and support native plants and animals.
A cement dance floor laid before the establishment of Canyonlands National Park (in 1964), was part of plans to create entertainment options in this remote, beautiful place. Ancient Puebloan petroglyphs grace cliff walls near Bonita Bend.

Since we’re in a national park, and one that sees a lot of visitors, we must follow rules to protect the riverbanks and sandbars. Our fires are contained in a fire pan, which we set up on a heat-proof tarp, so we don’t leave any charcoal behind on the beaches. We carry out all our own waste, too (in large army surplus ammo cans that work surprisingly well), except for pee, which goes in the river. Under our kitchen area, we lay down a mesh ground cloth that catches spills from food preparation. And we always pick up any bits of wrapping or charcoal we find left behind by others.

With all the care we take to not leave a trace, it’s a bit weird to encounter concrete dance floors, uranium mining equipment, old fencing from livestock corrals, iron pipes and cables, and remnants of old roads. But evidence of human ambition, as well as error, are everywhere; Weisheit points out the inscriptions on rocks, the caches of old signage, the pieces from a long-ago boat wreck.

And then there’s that dance floor. It is just one reminder, and a relatively benign one at that, of the many outsized ideas about how to “use” this wild space. The job of wilderness protection, amid an endless stream of development ideas, is never done.

Weisheit delivers a lunchtime talk on recent activities threatening the wildness of Cataract Canyon. Uranium processing mills are a big one (I learn there’s one underneath Lake Powell). Shifts in the price of oil create surges in demand for uranium, causing mining companies to spring up like mushrooms. “It’s an up and down history,” sighs Weisheit. “And one we aren’t going to get rid of—unless we work harder.”

I also hear about speculations for a nuclear power plant on the Green River. And expedition member Tom Martin, with River Runners for Wilderness, tells me of plans for the “Escalade,” a proposal for a massive hotel and tramway
on Navajo land at the confluence of the Colorado River and the Little Colorado River in the heart of the Grand Canyon, many miles downstream.

My dad, Jeffrey Ingram, first saw the Grand Canyon in 1962. He was twenty-five, having left New York and set out with his new family (I was one year old) to explore the West. The view from Mather Point changed his life. In 1964, he met David Brower, then executive director of the Sierra Club, and two years after that made his first river trip through the Grand Canyon with Brower and others.

Brower hired my dad as the Sierra Club’s Southwest representative to work with him to fight the proposed construction of two massive dams on the Colorado River within Grand Canyon. Like Weisheit, Brower had been in the canyons before Lake Powell buried them. He knew Glen Canyon and other lovely places that were lost. Describing how Brower launched a fight against the dams, Marc Reisner wrote in *Cadillac Desert*:

> His most valuable discovery, however, was an utterly unknown thirty-year-old mathematician from New Mexico named Jeffrey Ingram. Ingram was a self-described fanatic about two things: the Grand Canyon, and numbers. He loved playing with figures, and above all he loved exposing figures as frauds . . . pyramid schemes fascinated him, and in the Bureau [of Reclamation]’s payback scheme for the Pacific Southwest Water Plan, he thought he had discovered the greatest pyramid scheme anyone ever saw.
The crew sets up camp a few miles above the beginning of Lake Powell. Years of dropping water levels reveal banks of sediment (opposite shore) being colonized by cheatgrass, knapweed, and other nonnative plants. (r) A "living river," the ever-shifting and occasionally flooding waters of the Green are constantly at work sculpting and eroding sandbars.

Just below the confluence of the Green and the Colorado Rivers, Mrill Ingram, John Weisheit, and Lauren Wood take a break to prepare for the no-nonsense rapids downstream. (r) The Green River's placid waters belie the strong, dynamic currents moving below the surface.

In the end, the scrutiny that my dad helped bring forced the Bureau to revisit and defend its calculations—giving Brower and others time to build public resistance to the dams and eventually block them in 1968.

The Sierra Club went on to champion efforts to expand the boundary of Grand Canyon National Park, and on January 3, 1975, President Gerald Ford signed the Grand Canyon National Park Enlargement Act into law, nearly doubling the park’s area. (My dad has written about this history in his book, Hijacking a River: A Political History of the Colorado River in the Grand...
Weisheit and my dad discuss the transformative effects laws like the Clean Water Act of 1972 and the Wilderness Act of 1964 had for those efforts to protect wilderness. But now things are different, they acknowledge. “That was great legislation but it’s been litigated into meaningless bullshit,” Weisheit remarks. My dad agrees, “The corporations can hire more lawyers per minute than we can in a year. It’s unfair.”

“It’s time for environment 2.0,” Weisheit says, gesturing to the “youngsters” Lauren Wood and Sarah Stock floating several hundred yards ahead. “Those guys are great. They kick ass.”

I don’t hear Stock and Wood talking much about lawsuits. I do hear them talking about getting arrested. I hear how they are working around the clogged courts and the stranglehold that corporations have over public participation. They are taking to the streets, to the meeting rooms, and excavations sites. They aren’t going to participate in any established process, though. They are going to make a fuss.

I hear about Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ-rights protests, occupying courtrooms to protest oil and gas leasing on federal lands, and joining the “Water Protectors” stand against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Both grew up in canyon country, and work with Canyon Country Rising Tide, a grassroots group in Moab dedicated to protect the Colorado Plateau from tar sands development. Wood is the founder of the Green River Action Project, an affiliate of Living Rivers and Colorado Riverkeeper. She’s a third-generation rafting guide, working with her family’s rafting company, Holiday River Expeditions. She talks about how the family-business ethic of caring for the river has infused her work.

Later, I listen to a podcast in which Wood says more about her civil disobedience. She describes being inspired by Tim DeChristopher, a climate activist who created waves in 2008 by attending a Bureau of Land
Management oil-and-gas lease auction and putting up a bid for 22,500 acres for $1.8 million. (He ended up serving twenty-one months in prison for "disrupting" the process by bidding with no intent to pay.)

Wood describes “Keep It in the Ground,” a broad effort to halt coal, oil, and gas leasing on public lands. “If we’re honest about our climate future,” she says, “we can’t extract anymore. But we don’t have the luxury to wait for elected leaders. It’s a broken system. Edward Abbey wrote about sabotage,” she continues, “but that kind of activism has been severely repressed in our current surveillance culture. So acting means you have to do things in the public eye.”

Wood is very clear about the link between environmentalism and social justice. “I work to create a culture of people feeling like they can take back democratic power,” she explains. She connects the quest for a sustainable future to movements like Black Lives Matter and indigenous rights.

“In the climate justice movement we understand we can’t prioritize anyone’s agenda over another, but instead work toward a holistic movement where we all rise together.”

The passion she expresses, and which I hear from everyone in this group, is a constant life-shaping force, driving decisions about where to live and where to work. These are folks who abandon classrooms because they want to be outdoors, anxious to use what they’ve already learned to protect what they love. When I think about the challenges Wood and Stock are passionate about—saving democracy as well as the planet—I wonder how they are not overwhelmed. But their excitement is palpable. They are connected to a huge groundswell of protest against a status quo that separates the planet from the cause of justice for all. That connection—I think—that’s “environment 2.0.”

My father, who is celebrating his eightieth birthday with this trip, tells me it has given him a far broader view of the Colorado River. “There’s no
comparing canyons,” he says. “I realize now that they are each unique expressions of a river moving through a landscape—they are individuals but also cohere into a complete narrative that the river creates.” This sentiment helps explain the still raw feelings he has about the loss of Glen Canyon, he says, and his determination to not lose any more.

There it is again, the passion for the Earth that keeps fighters fighting, even as old threats resurface and new, even worse ones loom on the horizon.

I put away my notebook and tighten my life jacket in preparation for some whitewater. Turbulence ahead!

_Mrill Ingram is online media editor for The Progressive._