

## **A WILDERNESS RIVER IN GRAND CANYON?**

By Jo Johnson, RRFW Co-Director

Resistance to true wilderness consideration of the Colorado River in Grand Canyon National Park is deep and long-running. Although the strongest resistance comes from the outfitters, some public boaters, commercial customers and even some Park Service personnel declare it would be the end of the Grand Canyon to phase out motor use, even while admitting such use is a “non-conforming use” that the Park has been considering eliminating for decades.

We’ve heard time and again that motors are necessary for the old and fragile, for safety’s sake and outfitters cannot be profitable without them. We hear that commercial customers will not choose slower oar-powered trips. Is this true, or are these misconceptions or even fabrications?

Certainly, public (non-commercial, do-it-yourself) river runners include youngsters, oldsters, and disabled people. With extra planning and consideration, very few folks are limited by physical impairments from taking a rowing trip. It is not uncommon to encounter blind rowing trip passengers hiking, slowly and with the help of other trip participants, up Deer Creek Trail. Nor is it unusual to see paraplegic kayakers on Grand Canyon trips. Smaller, oar-powered rafts are much easier for certain folks to get on and off of than the huge tubes of motorized pontoon boats.

Which leads us to the safety issue. There is a widespread misconception that since oar powered rafts are smaller, easier to flip and tossed about by waves, that riding them is more dangerous. In actuality, there have been 7 deaths on commercial trips (predominately motorized) since 1997 while there have been none on public trips (98% rowed) during the same time period. As mentioned before, those huge pontoon tubes can be difficult to negotiate.

Lastly, what about the profits of the outfitters? Clearly, fast, expensive motorized trips are profitable, but economic research shows that the single most important factor in outfitter profitability is not company size, trip length or method, equipment inventory or allocation. The critical factor for profitability is the skill with which the company is managed. In this study, the most lucrative companies were among the smallest and largest, both motor and rowing concessions. Similarly, among the least profitable, there was no relationship between company size, craft used, types of trips offered or allocation allotment.

Another concern often voiced by outfitters in the event of a motor phase out is the tremendous costs associated with the change in equipment. Ironically, as capital investments go, rafting equipment is not particularly expensive. Plenty of public citizen boaters, which by the way, have the same income levels as average Americans, own the same quality and type of equipment used by rowing companies. It would be reasonable to allow for a lengthy period of gradual conversion, perhaps with incentives for a quicker conversion to oars.

And what about choice? What choices would concessions clients make if they were truly free to choose? That remains a mystery, since there is little choice now, but we do know that oar trips fill up much faster than rowing trips. Also, according to a study done in 1974, and a follow-up done more recently in 1998, showed nearly all rowing trip customers would not choose a motor trip if they returned, and a large percentage of motor customers also would prefer an oar-powered trip.

One wonders if a whole new market could be tapped in a no-motors Grand Canyon scenario. Rowing trips in a motor-free canyon could be sold as a totally new experience even to returning clients. Many customers would find a quiet, slower trip a much more rewarding way to truly commune with nature and the river, and very different from the motor trip they may have taken previously.