The View of a Jet Boat Shuttle Driver
A Consideration of Differences

By Dirk Vaughan

Editor's Note: *Dirk is a partner in Tex's Riverways, a jet boat concessionaire in Canyonlands National Park. He is also a jet boat operator. I allowed Dirk the opportunity to respond to Pete Walka's letter. Dirk will also address the benefits of jet boat services and the difficulties encountered while operating a jet boat.*

In the business of running rivers, and interacting with those persons who usually share a great love of water and wilderness, one would think that open-minded consideration might be more evident when facing issues of debate. Unfortunately this '96 season has been a time for several incidents of open hostility and misunderstanding over issues which directly involve the primary activities of a business which I partly own and operate. The issues in question are the operation of jet boats on the Colorado River from Moab to Spanish Bottom, the "vast" numbers of private canoers that allegedly trash the Green River, and to a lesser degree, the desire by many people to see the Green through Stillwater Canyon become a non-motorized section of water. Through discussion with several fellow river professionals, and the fact that I am intimately involved in all these issues, it seems I am elected to address them.

I have been driving jet boats on the Colorado, primarily to pickup canoers at The Confluence, for six years. That should establish my jet boat credentials, but I have also been canoeing and backpacking along the Green and Colorado River corridors for about twelve years. I have traveled the two rivers and surrounding canyons, both inside and out of National Park boundaries for many, many hundreds of miles, by totally non-motorized means during the off-season months when virtually no other person can be found on the river or in the backcountry. I have finished far more river trips by hiking out than by using the same service I provide as a business, and would show my personal politics by the following thought: if by some chance Canyonlands National Park would be declared completely non-motorized both by land and by river, I would support such a policy with tears of joy and watch my business become bankrupt and my job extinct. Since the possibility of such a policy being enacted is roughly the same as that of cliff swallows nesting inside my nose, let's return to reality and examine the issues at hand.

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I believe that certain aspects of the relation between the use of jet boats to transport canoers and the reality of an inaccessible Confluence area must be accepted as facts in our modern world. I do not propose that jet boats are a compliment to the river environment. What I propose is that the reasons for their use are valid and the alternatives to their use are far more intrusive.

Fact #1: There is a large segment of people who are not interested in, or able to do, the white water of Cataract Canyon, and insist on a reliable, economical means of transport to get them back to Moab at the conclusion of their flat water trip. Given the definite pro-use record of the National Park Service, such a transport service is viewed as an obligation to be provided. It is no more practical to insist that flat water boaters find a non-motorized means to get themselves home than it would be to require commercial raft clients to thumb a ride from Hite Marina.

Fact #2: A way must be provided to transport large numbers of people plus boats and equipment from The Confluence area. So would anyone like to have a nice road built to provide access to The Confluence? Surely anyone can recognize the extreme impact and foolishness of this solution. How about air service? Yeah right, the cost to the individual would be enormous, and the volume of gear and people would require literally dozens of flights a day. Talk about intrusive.

Fact #3: Until we develop the Star Trek transporter beam the only reliable, practical, and economical way to accomplish the transportation needs at The Confluence are by jet boats, which can carry heavy loads upstream in extremely variable water conditions and operated by trained professional drivers.

But jet boats are so loud and obnoxious you say? Of course they are, so are freight trains, buses, diesel trucks, motorcycles, jet planes, space shuttles, and game show hosts. For anyone that adores wilderness and solitude just about everything associated with the mechanized world is inherently obnoxious, so get over it. We'll change the world after the bomb drops or some specially tailored virus kills off all the Republicans.

Once you accept commercial jet boats as the lesser of other evils there are actually some side benefits to the service. I know of several incidents where sick and injured clients and guides from commercial raft trips have been taken off the river suffering everything from severe flu and bladder infections to broken limbs and fractured necks.

Jet boats have delivered to just about every commercial white water company a smorgasbord of items including replacement motors, air pumps, forgotten boxes of food and equipment, overdue clients, overdue client baggage, and overdue guides to name a few. Except for the routine transport of clients the vast majority of the aforementioned services are performed without charge as a gesture of goodwill and you know, I don't recall a single guide giving me crap about my loud motor as I was doing something that made his or her life easier. Jet boats are continually removing large unsightly trash items from the river including oil drums, plastic buckets, and at least two refrigerators that I know of.

Canyonlands National Park already restricts permits for jet boat traffic to only two companies and it is extremely unlikely, according to Park officials, that that situation will change. When compared to many other rivers that truly experience constant conflict between white water boats and jet boats the amount of jet boat traffic on the Colorado is negligible. On a busy jet boat day one might see two or three boats from the Park boundary to Spanish Bottom, on most days you might see one, on many days you will see none. In July of this year on one single day I counted 64 commercial and private rafts from Spanish Bottom to Potash. Exactly who is getting in the way of whom in that situation? In 1992 the company most frequently seen at the Confluence ran to that area exactly 133 times from March to October. In 1995 the total was 135 times for the same period. Jet boat usage inside the Park has not increased to any significant degree and it should be noted that both companies voluntarily restrict all jet boat traffic to the Colorado River corridor in order to preserve the less hectic environment more commonly found on the Green.

It seems there is a great potential for misunderstanding when it comes to jet boats passing rubber boats without reducing speed. In addressing this situation I will not refer to any State boating laws. State boating laws for navigation are designed as a guideline for the stable water conditions of lakes and marinas. There are no traffic cops on the Colorado and it should be obvious to anyone that the unpredictable and always variable conditions on the river render standardized boating laws to being as impractical as a condom dispenser in a fertility clinic.

First of all, a jet boat should make every effort to go to a wakeless speed for any raft that has swimmers in the water or is parked against a shoreline that is rough or rocky. I have talked with a lot of raft guides and without exception they have assured me that a jet boat wake creates no problem for a raft that is floating free or parked on a sandy shore. During periods of high water there are few reasons why jet boats cannot give rubber boats a wide berth. That situation changes completely as water levels come back to normal. Perhaps some understanding can be found by attempting to explain what it is like to drive a jet boat at 30 mph in shallow water conditions.

A raft guides' technical skills come to the fore when it is time to run the white water, all concentration must be intense and focused and mistakes result in serious problems. Shallow water conditions are the jet boat drivers version of white water concentration. Due to the speeds involved any momentary lapse of attention can result in serious consequences. If a raft hits a sandbar there is little chance of injury, the problem is quickly remedied usually resulting in some embarrassment and minor inconvenience. If a jet boat hits a sandbar the chance for injury to a client is high and getting the boat off the sand often takes hours of backbreaking labor that involves special equipment. A jet boat must seek out the deepest part of the channel and when forced to cross stretches of shallow water cannot reduce speed without running the risk of getting stuck. It is much more difficult to do this if rafts crowd the deep water channel when they could just as easily and with far less serious consequences move towards shallow water for the brief period it takes for the jet boat to pass. As always common sense and courtesy should rule the day when rafts and jet boats approach each other.

When considering the "dramatic increase" of canoers on the Green River one must first realize that only the lower 52 miles from Mineral Bottom to the Confluence (Stillwater Canyon) is controlled by the National Park. The stretch from the Town of Green River down to Mineral Bottom (Labyrinth Canyon) is controlled by the BLM and is also subject to much more loosely regulated private use and the ability to use existing roads for private shuttles. Secondly, all statistical use figures for flat water trips in Stillwater Canyon prior to 1991 are grossly low and inaccurate due to poor record keeping procedures by parties no longer concerned with commercial operation in Canyonlands.

From 1991 to 1995 the numbers of flat water users saw a '91 low of 1,483 and a '93 peak of 2,172, with the average for that five year period being 1,713. A small percentage of these numbers represent users on the Colorado. All-in-all a fairly stable trend that could hardly be called "dramatic" and although flat water user days have increased at a larger percentage than white water users, white water boaters still outnumber flat water on an average of 4 to 1.

There is no doubt that in the past several years the number of private users has increased significantly on both river corridors among the rafting community and canoers. It is fairly common to see private rafts launching at Mineral bottom and Potash. I know of no crystal ball that allows anyone to determine that "ignorant canoers" are solely responsible for any destruction or abuse of natural resources and it is unfair and reckless to condemn any one group based on mere suspicion, conjecture or personal prejudice.

To portray Stillwater Canyon as in the process of being "destroyed" does not match either NPS surveys of the resource or my own personal yearly observation based upon 12 years of use. There has of course been isolated incidents of abuse and vandalism because of the often disrespectful nature of many humans regardless of what boat they might use and perhaps it can be said that the incidents have grown more frequent, but to describe the condition of Stillwater in alarming terms is not entirely accurate. I do however, wholeheartedly agree with the belief that now is the time for number restrictions to be placed on all users of Stillwater and there is little doubt that the River Management Plan currently being developed by the Park will address this issue.

When considering the issue of a non-motorized Stillwater Canyon it is essential to look at the current logistics of commercial operation and how various user groups might be affected. Whether for good or bad it must be admitted that the Colorado is much more of an avenue of transportation than the Green. On the Colorado there are many more motors in use, launch points are more accessible via paved roads, greater numbers of people use it and there is more water, making navigation easier for motors. The Green and Colorado are different roads that lead to the same destination, that being Cataract Canyon. This is a very fortunate natural opportunity to create something rare and cause only minor inconvenience to a few.

One has only to consider the thousands upon thousands of waterways controlled and flooded by dams to see what a rare jewel Stillwater is. Powerboats and jet skis have an unlimited number of places to choose from. All commercial operators currently motoring through Cataract can still continue to do so by using the Colorado. What about the thousands of people who merely ask for a reasonable distance of river where they can paddle and row free from the sound of motors? Where is the place in canyon country that does not require extraordinary effort and ideal water conditions that they can go? This is the group that is being ignored because they are not backed by millions of dollars in commercial interest and political power.

A motorless Stillwater could even become a marketing tool for those who always consider the business aspect of these debates. Companies can capitalize on such an environment by creating more leisurely trips with an emphasis on the naturalist aspects of river running. The clients primarily interested in quick white water thrills can be better served on the Colorado anyway. The companies who currently motor the Green need only change some operational logistics and advertising strategies. A motorless Green doesn't prevent anyone from continuing to operate a perfectly viable Cataract Canyon business.

I do not want a non-motorized Stillwater to increase my share of the flat water market. I have quite enough business right now and hope the Park places restrictions on Stillwater that keeps it as is. My motivation is very personal. Stillwater Canyon is the place that changed my life and how I view its priorities. It is the place that showed me the joy of exploring a virgin wilderness and let me imagine the sound of ancient songs. It helped me to heal the wounds suffered in the struggle with a violent society. It is the church of my soul and I owe it more than I can ever repay. If I can convince more guides and business owners and government officials that it is indeed a place that deserves special consideration then I will have repaid a small portion of that debt. If anyone chooses to consider such sentiment, coming from the mind of a jet boat driver, as "nauseating hypocrisy" then so be it.