

Gunnison River, Colorado

Here's a drainage feeding the Colorado River in the vicinity of Grand Junction. The Gunnison begins where the Taylor and East Rivers join, being fed by tributaries out of the Continental Divide, the Sawatch Range, and the Elk and San Juan Mountains. The Gunnison was once channeled by Unawep Canyon. While the floor of the Gunnison River remained the same altitude the Uncompahgre Uplift rose two miles causing the river to sweep the strata downstream to the Colorado River and the Colorado in turn to carry that sediment downstream.

Here the geology is changed from the familiar deposits of the Colorado Plateau. The Kayenta Formation is missing atop the Wingate as is the softer Chinle below. Since the erodable Chinle is not present the river could not carry away sediment to widen the entrenchment. And with the absence of the Kayenta the combination of the Entrada on the Wingate creates an even taller cliff than we are accustomed to viewing while floating along. The Black Rock of the Uncompahgre Complex is just underground further fortifying the exasperation of erosional forces in the Gunnison River region.

The river and community received their name from Lieutenant John Gunnison. He surveyed the area in 1853 to report the feasibility of a railroad across the Rockies Mountains. He stayed clear of the abyssal, 50 mile long gorge, the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. The schist is of the Uncompahgre Complex. The rim is no more than 350' across in this chasm while the river is a mere 40' wide at it's shores. Here the walls lift from 200' to 2000'.

The first known visitors were on foot wanting to find a way to install a diversion tunnel in 1901. By 1909 a six mile tunnel carried 300,000 acre feet from the Gunnison to the Uncompahgre Valley. As far as the first river runners go... the first folks used the mechanical advantage of ropes and climbing technology to portage. The blocks of rock choking the Gunnison River were and are enormous portages in Black Canyon. The rate of descent of the river troubles experts today and the difficulty of access makes rescue arduous . . . plus.

Upstream are three dams. Crystal Reservoir has flooded Cimmaron to the East Portal of Black Canyon National Monument in 1970. The other two, Morrow Point and Blue Mesa Reservoirs were installed further upstream some years before Crystal. In 1980 the Chevron Corporation donated 300 cfs to the Nature Conservancy. It's a gift that is the first of it's kind in Western Water politics. The Nature Conservancy plans to keep it in the river to help instream flows. That 300 cfs is worth millions of dollars.

Downstream are calmer waters, lazing past Dominguez and Escalante Canyons, named after 1716 Spanish explorers by the USGS Hayden party in 1875. Irrigation dams and bridges lay across the lower stretch presenting dangerous impediments to the unaware. This stretch is controlled by the Montrose office of the Bureau of Land Management. There is a proposed Dominguez Project to dam and create a hydro-power plant a short way above the community of Whitewater, Colorado. U.S. Fish and Wildlife report Colorado Pike Minnow (previously known as Colorado Squaw Fish) reside in this area.