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Review: Still the Wild River Runs: Congress, the Sierra Club and the Fight to Save Grand Canyon

By Byron E. Pearson

Reviewed by [Ryder W. Miller](#)
San Francisco, California, USA

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Byron E. Pearson. *Still the Wild River Runs: Congress, the Sierra Club and the Fight to Save Grand Canyon*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8165-2058-5. US\$45.00. Acid-free, archival-quality paper.

Just as a mountain can be a metaphor of the struggle necessary to climb to the top, or the coastline a boundary between different worlds, or a river a journey, the Grand Canyon can represent a vast barrier between groups of people. In the saga recounted in *Still the Wild River Runs* by Byron E. Pearson, the Grand Canyon could have represented the divide between the unconcerned public or government and the environmental movement, which is chronicled to have "come of age" as a result of having won the battle to save the Grand Canyon. Pearson, bucking documented environmental history in such works as *Wilderness and the American Mind* by Roderick Nash, finds other heroes than the environmental activists.

Pearson chronicles how saving the Grand Canyon was a battle that the environmental movement had to win. In the 1960s, late in the battle, the Sierra Club lost its tax deductible status when it placed ads in the *New York Times* in order to protest plans to dam the Grand Canyon. But one should wonder why Pearson is so interested in making the point that the Sierra Club does not fully deserves the credit it gained in the environmental movement for its role in this struggle. While reading, I questioned why Pearson did not point out a dozen times that the Sierra Club bridged the gap between the environmental movement and the un-motivated public by making the stand they did. The public responded by supporting the Sierra Club, seeing the action of the federal government to remove their tax-deductible status as an act that prohibited free speech. The public responded with unprecedented support and financial donations, and the Sierra Club gained public recognition as the preservers of the Grand Canyon. But Pearson is more impressed with the political machinations and the regulatory agency players. Chronicled here are the maneuvers of Arizona congressman Stewart Udall, the Senate Interior Committee, the Central Arizona Project, Arizona senator Carl Hayden, and others.

Pearson goes a long way to argue that the Sierra Club had less of an effect on the political debate that resulted in the preservation of the Grand Canyon. Pearson relays that the real gain was the passage of the National

Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), which gave preservationists inroads into the political process. Pearson argues that the Sierra Club had a mirage of power, but one should question the timing of publishing such a perspective. Not only did the environmental movement lose its chance of having Al Gore or Ralph Nader as the environmental president, the wise use movement with its plethora of new environmental groups has also obfuscated the movement. The Sierra Club must presently contend with what could be viewed as a political backlash against environmentalism, a sometimes unsympathetic president who was dubbed the "polluters' president," and the many concerned parties who want the Sierra Club to take on their issues irrespective of the bureaucratic process that results in the Sierra Club's issues. The book comes across as an ill-timed cheap shot, and suggests that the author doesn't understand that the political process does not occur in the absence of the public, but rather should reflect the public's interests and concerns, which groups like the Sierra Club sometimes need to channel.

The work does not read as well intentioned or concerned, but maybe the Sierra Club is facing the consequences of the environmental movement no longer always being nice. There are millions of concerned people, but the leaders (and writers) need now to be experts, people with degrees or job titles, famous environmental activists, editors, presidents, or the chosen few who are concerned and extremely eloquent. Maybe anger is necessary, which *Sierra Magazine* with its editorial internships does a good job of instilling in future environmental writers and editors. On the road to becoming an editor, one may feel taken for granted and anger can sometimes be self defeating. The field has become very competitive resulting in rivalries, the disenfranchised and the disgruntled. The Sierra Club will continue to be influential because it has made efforts to be mainstream, to have high standards, to be helpful when possible, to respect the environmental quality and environmental justice movements, to protect endangered species, and to reach out to larger audiences. The Sierra Club also has a lot of members who will help them do what is necessary as well.

The loss of the White House has some of us environmentalists feeling like we need to convince the public of the importance of environmentalism again. Maybe the environmental movement needs to breach this grand barrier again, that is, we need to find new ways to impress the public again with the importance of environmentalism's concerns. The public can be reminded that environmentalism is a scientific revolution, which argues that we need to change some of our daily behaviors. This is not always easy, and Pearson needs to be reminded that when the people lead or are informed enough to be concerned, the politicians should follow. The established environmental groups like the Sierra Club have been responsible for facilitating the bridging of this sometimes-grand divide.

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Ryder W. Miller <dolphin1965@hotmail.com> is a freelance environmental and science reporter who has been published in *Sierra Magazine*, *California Coast & Ocean*, *California Wild*, and *Hydrosphere*.

Author's Rebuttal to this review

June 6, 2003

Dear Editors,

I would like to express my appreciation to the editorial staff of *The Electronic Green Journal* for providing me with an opportunity to respond to Ryder W. Miller's recent review of my book, *Still the Wild River Runs*. I believe an objective reader would find that most of Miller's critiques range from the simply inaccurate to the blatantly untrue.

Miller contends that my book is "an ill-timed cheap shot" at the Sierra Club and other grass roots environmental organizations, because I examine the pragmatics of the political process instead of assigning the mantle of victor to the club during the Grand Canyon dam controversy of the 1960s. Miller also states that I do not recognize that the Sierra Club "bridged the gap between the environmental movement and the un-motivated public" during the controversy. Finally, Miller argues that this author fails to understand that the "political process does not occur in the absence of the public, but rather should [*sic*] reflect the public's interests and concerns" and that this author "need[s] to be reminded that when the people lead or are informed enough to be concerned, the politicians should [*sic*] follow."

Miller fails to engage the major thesis of my book: that although the Sierra Club and other environmental activists succeeded in generating a great deal of public support for their position during the Grand Canyon dam fight, they are not the most important reason that the dams were ultimately deleted from the legislation passed in 1968. Because environmentalists lacked access to the political process in this pre-NEPA era, I contend that the dams were deleted as part of a pragmatic political compromise. However, instead of posing an effective counter-argument, Miller instead tries to denigrate my work by insinuating that it is somehow not of the same caliber as that of historian Roderick Nash who writes what Miller calls "documented environmental history."

Although Professor Nash wrote *Wilderness And The American Mind*, one of the most important environmental history books ever written, he is also a scholar who understands that his, and anyone else's interpretations are open

to question. Debate and dialogue are the lifeblood of scholarly inquiry, and to differ from a mainstream interpretation is acceptable and encouraged among academics. However, Miller apparently does not understand this. I disagree with Nash's contention in *Wilderness*, that the Sierra Club "saved" Grand Canyon, and I have written more than 200 pages of text supported by thirty-three *pages* of footnotes that cite a copious number of primary sources or "documents" to support my argument. In contrast, Dr. Nash's ten page discussion of the Grand Canyon fight in *Wilderness*, written while he was employed as a writer by the Sierra Club during the height of the dam controversy, is supported by seventeen footnotes, most of which also cite primary sources. Although it is true that Nash writes "documented environmental history," it is equally true that I have also done so, and to a much greater extent, and from a much more objective perspective than has Dr. Nash, at least about this topic. Miller's inference that my work is somehow less "documented" than that of other environmental historians is ludicrous, given my extensive research and the fact that my book is the only book-length analysis of the controversy that has ever been published.

Miller also dismisses my book as an "ill timed cheap shot" and in so doing demonstrates his/her ignorance of the scholarly research, writing, and publishing process. He/she insinuates that I foisted the book upon the public at a moment when the environmental movement's political power has declined when compared with its influence in the recent past. But is this really the case? I initiated my research in the spring of 1992, and submitted the book manuscript to potential publishers in 1999. Two years of revision followed. (If I am not mistaken, the Clinton presidency lasted from 1993-2001). The book was published in 2002, during the current Bush administration. Given that this book took me almost ten years to complete, and the majority of the work was done during the Clinton administration, I am mystified as to how Miller can possibly believe that I somehow bided my time to wait until environmentalists had "lost the White House" so I could add insult to injury. In accusing me of taking cheap shots at the environmental movement, Miller attributes to me both a sense of deviousness and foresight that I do not currently possess, nor aspire to attain. Instead it is Miller's insipid review, which is virtually devoid of scholarly analysis, that constitutes a cheap shot at an author with whom he/she disagrees, but whose ideas he/she either lacks the time, ambition, or ability to engage.

Miller also contends that this author fails to recognize that the Sierra Club managed to bridge the gap between the uninformed public and the environmental movement. Again I must disagree and ponder whether Miller actually took the time to read significant portions of my book. The efforts initiated by David Brower, Martin Litton, Richard Bradley, and Richard

Leonard to inform the public about the danger to Grand Canyon are central to the story. Further, the Sierra Club's brilliant strategy of creating a tax-exempt foundation in order to, in Richard Leonard's words, "remain a fighting organization," is explained in-depth both in terms of its impact upon the Grand Canyon fight and the club's ability to mobilize an enormous public consistency after the battle had ended. It is this huge public reaction that took place within the context of the turbulent 1960s, which propelled the club to its current status as one of the leading environmental organizations in the world. Contrary to Miller's assertions, my book gives full credit to the Sierra Club and its leaders for raising the public's environmental consciousness during the debate over the Grand Canyon dams.

However, it is also true that the roles played by influential political and bureaucratic figures such as Carl Hayden, Stewart and Morris Udall, and Floyd Dominy are also discussed in depth. If one were to write about this extremely complex political and cultural debate without allowing the key political power brokers of the day to share center stage, the analysis would be woefully incomplete and the story in its entirety would remain to be told. This author did not, as Miller suggests, attempt to find "other heroes than the environmental activists," rather I sought to write a historical analysis and most importantly tell an all-inclusive story.

Finally, Miller contends that this author "should remember" and "should be reminded" that politicians are greatly influenced by public opinion. Oh really? If Miller truly believes that, I must question whether he/she has ever studied American political history or current events on even a casual basis. As American citizens, we would all like to think that our elected representatives respond to the desires of the public but does that really happen? What does history tell us about the impact of public opinion? One only need examine recent public debates over the Iraqi war, or historical events such as the impeachment of Bill Clinton or the expansion of the Vietnam war during the Nixon administration to see that there are plenty of instances throughout American history where Congress has virtually ignored overwhelming public opposition, and pursued its own agendas.

Thus, for Miller to suggest that I do not understand the political process is absurd. *Still The Wild River Runs* is not a book of idealistic whimsy, rather it chronicles events that actually occurred. Instead of writing about how things "should" work, I analyzed how the political system actually did work during the Grand Canyon dam controversy. Bare-knuckle politics is not a pretty sight, but it is reality, and this is the reality I teach my students. I would suggest that Miller is the person who needs to be reminded of how things actually are so he/she can deal with reality rather than pine about

how things ought to be.

I also object to Miller's trivialization of the environmental movement as a mere "scientific revolution," the findings of which, he/she argues, can be used to change human behavior. If environmentalists are to remain optimistic in the current political climate and effectively advocate in favor of wilderness preservation and biodiversity, then we must remember that the "science" of environmentalism takes place in the context of ideas and competing value systems. We currently live in an overquantified, economically-driven society, where the green-and I don't mean environmental green-bottom line is king. Only by educating people and demonstrating that aesthetic, intangible values are equally as important as quantifiable values (scientific, economic, or otherwise) will we as a species begin to address the underlying causes of our exploitative attitudes toward nature. Perhaps then our children will no longer be programmed by society (or the National Park Service for that matter) to view a giant redwood in terms of the number of three bedroom houses that could be built with it.

I have always welcomed constructive scholarly critiques of my work, and have engaged in numerous lively debates about the Grand Canyon dam controversy. However, the criticism Miller levels at my book is not only trite, its lack of analysis ultimately reveals the inadequacies of his/her credentials to critique scholarly work. I am confident an objective reader would agree.

Sincerely,

Byron E. Pearson, Ph.D.
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West Texas A&M University