

**Tramways, Skywalks, and Adventure Tourism: a brief history of controversial Grand Canyon proposals for bringing economic prosperity to the Havasupai, Hualapai, and Navajo nations by Larry R. Stucki, Ph.D.**

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(Although all three nations initially expressed interest in various such proposals, for reasons examined in this paper only the Navajo have not yet chosen any such pathway to economic prosperity.)

Soon after the end of World War II, the isolation that had long separated the Hualapais, the Havasupais, and the Navajos from the battleground of national American politics broke down suddenly with the controversy that began with the completion of the Glen Canyon dam upstream on the main Colorado River. Too late did environmental lobbyists realize that they had perhaps made a tremendous mistake in allowing this dam to be constructed in order to stop the construction of a dam in Dinosaur National Monument. River running and other forms of “adventure tourism” had by now become popular American sports creating a major wilderness lobby against the construction of further dams along the Colorado.

Opposing this lobby were members of a powerful political coalition from the Phoenix-Tucson area who were fighting for what they believed to be their fair share of the water from the already over-utilized river. A key component in the proposed Central Arizona Project to obtain this water was the construction of a dam on the Colorado just above Lake Mead. Revenues from this dam were to be used to pay back the construction costs of the remainder of the project. The second benefit would be the creation of a new recreational lake that would please not only Arizona sportsmen but also the Havasupais’ neighboring tribe the Hualapais who for economic reasons enthusiastically supported the construction of the dam since it would produce enough jobs to employ every member of the tribe and in return for the use of their land, they would receive \$1 million in annual revenue.

Environmental opponents of this proposed dam quickly pointed out that not only was the storage capacity of this new dam not needed for the Central Arizona Project but also that it would back water up into the existing Grand Canyon National Park, (a claim, the dam supporters said was false). Then, sensing that National Park protection would be their best bet against further dam construction on remaining free-flowing sections of the Colorado, they were able to persuade their supporters in Congress to sponsor a bill to enlarge the boundary of the park, thus injecting the Havasupais with their spectacular waterfalls and large grazing permit areas more than the other two tribes into the middle of the controversy as basic human rights were pitted against the need to protect the natural flora, fauna, and scenic values of the canyon and surrounding plateaus.

In all of America north of Mexico there is no more isolated Native American village than Supai and this has often proven to be more of a curse to its permanent residents than a blessing. No major Interstate highway passes near the reservation and even the long, dreary access road from highway 66 ends at a desolate "hilltop" eight miles away from and half a mile above the village. Thus, even today, Supai can be reached only by helicopter or a steep, dry, and often extremely hot, 8 mile foot and horse trail.

However, every summer, for thousands of hardy tourists who seek a temporary escape from the pressures of modern "civilized" life, the "wilderness" of Cataract Canyon becomes a "Shangri-La." Lured by full-color illustrated articles in such magazines and newspapers as the National Geographic, Arizona Highways, and the Arizona Republic; countless numbers of Boy Scouts, college students, and adventuresome couples and families have sought access to the pleasures and delights of this watery "paradise."

Although the extremely scenic waterfalls had attracted adventuresome tourists since the promotional efforts of Bass in the 1890s and several feature articles in the National Geographic magazine in the decades after, the real upturn

in tourist visitation occurred followed such publications as the July, 1963 special issue of Arizona Highways that devoted most of its content including cover and many other full color internal images to a "Havasupai Adventure."

However, many tourists before the major scenic areas were returned from National Park ownership to Havasupai control, deeply resented being forced to pay the Havasupai a small fee for crossing their land on the way to the waterfalls and many times individuals and groups deliberately hiked through the village at night or in the early morning hours to avoid paying this fee. Also, many tourists over the years have complained bitterly about the poor maintenance of foot trails and bridges through the reservation and the problem of Havasupai horses hired to ride or carry their belongings to the National Park Campground not being available on the promised day, a difficulty which was often especially severe around the time of the late summer Peach Festival.

And during my years of visits to Supai (1967 – 1980) those few visitors who came to see "real Indians" as well as the waterfalls were often disillusioned when they found no war bonnets, tipis, or "eager-to-please-the-visitor" dancing natives. They and many of the other tourists also complained about the many overgrazed and often unkempt yards and pastures they passed on the trail. For them, the myth of the native ecologist had been shattered.

The Havasupais, too, had mixed feelings about the tourists in spite of the fact that as early as the mid-60s, tourist dollars began supplying about one half of all the annual income flowing into the tribal economy and about one third of all direct and indirect personal cash income. Supai residents also often had to cope with visitors who took photos of individual Havasupais without obtaining permission from them, stole fruit from their trees, infected the creek with hepatitis, endured empty financial promises from photographers and filmmakers and competed with local people for the limited supply of fresh meat that was available on mail delivery days at the village store. However, the main problem with tourism was that the average resident of Supai derived very little direct economic benefit from it during those years.

Seeing these problems, through the years there have been a number of individuals like Martin Goodfriend, a California “do-gooder” who began publicly attacking the “paradise” image that many summer visitors had about life in the canyon by pointing out the poverty, sickness, and unemployment to be found at Supai which were often intensified during the winter months when the long dirt road to the hilltop would be made impassable by snow or rain for weeks at a time and when tourist income was nonexistent. Goodfriend and others tried to convince the canyon residents that with improved access to the outside world, a massive tourist complex could be created at Supai that would easily make the tribe the wealthiest in the nation on a per capita basis. Put forward as the easiest way to accomplish this feat would be the construction of an aerial tramway from the canyon rim to the valley floor. The nearby South Rim area of Grand Canyon National Park was already being over utilized by tourists even during many of the winter months and it was certain that large numbers of these tourists could be lured to the milder winter and spectacular waterfalls of Havasu Canyon. All of these visitors could be brought into the canyon below the central part of the village of Supai so that the Havasupais could actually enjoy more privacy than was now possible with the main trail winding past many of their houses.

Increased numbers of visitors would mean increased employment and, as additional tribal members returned to Supai or the nearby canyon rim to share this new wealth, perhaps additional grade levels could be taught at the local school (or perhaps a new school that could be built on the nearby canyon rim) to reduce the number of long periods of lonely separation that children and parents endured when older students were shipped to boarding schools each winter. And with easier access to the outside world, it should be easier than in the past to recruit and retain qualified school teachers and staff especially if new housing was made available to them on the rim. Food prices much higher than those in the nearest outside towns and cities would drop and the level of medical care would dramatically improve especially if a medical clinic could be built on the nearby canyon rim. Housing for the staff of such a clinic could be added to that

provided for school teachers and staff as well as for the returning Havasupais. The water needed for such a development could be pumped to the rim for storage but only during the night to avoid damaging the day time waterfall viewing experience for visitors.

Although many residents of Supai were not overjoyed at the prospect of massive numbers of tourists coming to their peaceful canyon, about one half of Supai's families in a 1968 survey felt that the construction of a tramway or road to the village would help them economically and on March 21, 1969, the Havasupai tribal council passed a resolution supporting the construction of tramways in the Grand Canyon. Opposition to the tramway or road came mainly from those heads of households who controlled the packing industry. They feared that a tramway or road would destroy their means of making a living as well as their dominant economic, social, and political status in village life. As anyone can easily see during the annual Peach Dance Rodeo when horses and riders are compared and either admired or jeered, it would not be an easy transition to a new way of life where horse ownership and control would lose their primary importance as symbols of power, wealth, and independence.

Rightly or wrongly, many of the Havasupais by the 1960s felt that the U.S. government was more concerned about the welfare of the backpacking tourists than of the permanent inhabitants of the canyon. And by 1969, they seemed resigned to their fate as they accepted the pavement of 124 million dollars from the Indian Claims Commission as a "final" settlement for the land which had earlier been taken from them although they did at this time manage to retain use rights to 173,400 acres of the barren land surrounding Havasu Canyon.

Nevertheless, in early 1971 sensing that even these use rights might be in jeopardy as the Grand Canyon National Park enlargement debate began in Congress, the Tribal Council Chairman, citing the case of Taos Pueblo that had 48,000 acres additional land restored to it, felt that now the Havasupai had a viable chance to obtain a similar victory in their long struggle to regain control of

the adjacent National Park Service campground and other traditional use areas despite having accepted Government compensation for their earlier losses.

Soon, Havasupai tribal leaders sought congressional support for their cause and found it in a rare coalition of liberal and conservative senators and representatives including among many others such well-known individuals as Senators Barry Goldwater, Ted Kennedy, and Hubert Humphrey and Representative Morris Udall. Even President Nixon, perhaps, it is suggested, because of his need for support from key senators and representatives during his Watergate troubles, became a firm supporter of the Havasupai cause. And, in a brilliant campaign, the Havasupais, their tribal lawyers and the above coalition of congressmen beat out the combined opposition of almost all national conservation groups and the National Park Service.

However, the fulfillment of this long-held dream came with a very heavy price since the expansion agreement would require them to forever severely restrict any attempt to greatly expand tourist visitations and accommodations over those few that were already present at Supai. Especially forbidden would be such things as the construction of a tramway or road to the village and the pumping of water from Havasu Creek to the canyon rim. Thus, in contrast to their neighbors, the Hualapai, who without such restrictions would after eight years of the opening of its extremely popular tourist attraction, the Grand Canyon Skywalk, in 2015 record its 1 million<sup>th</sup> paying visitor that year, no such option would be available to them.

Instead, they have recently decided to dramatically raise entry, packing, camping, and lodge fees, to take advantage of the growing numbers of “adventure tourists” who are willing to pay a high price to spend a few days in “Shangri-La.” Therefore, beginning in 2019, the tribe required a stay of a minimum of three nights with a camping and reservation fee of \$100 per person per night Monday through Thursday, and \$125 per night Friday through Sunday. And in 2020 for those staying in the lodge, the charge is \$440 per night, each room accommodating up to 4 persons, each of which will be charged an

additional \$110 entrance/environmental fee. And for those hikers willing to pay extra to have their backpacks carried by Pack Mules to the campground or lodge and then at the end of their visit back to the hilltop parking lot, the price is \$400 round-trip per Pack Mule, each one of which can carry up to 4 bags. The charge for emergency Pack Mules (if available) is \$400 one-way and campers on the day they will be hiking back to the hilltop who bring their packs to the “campsite drop off point” later than 7am will be charged an extra \$300. Daytime hiking to the waterfalls and back to the hilltop in one day is now forbidden.

So far this steep hike in fees has not led to a decreased number of visitors seeking to obtain, as early in the year as possible, the highly coveted entry permissions even though the average income level of the visitors is probably much higher than it had been previously. However, despite this tremendous increase in tribal income (possibly now threatened this year by the new coronavirus), many of the extremely severe societal problems that the earlier tramway proposal had sought to alleviate still remain (e.g., see Santos 2017; Woods and Cano 2017), possible solutions to which I will be examining in the final chapter of my forthcoming book.

Turning now to the Navajos, an attempt to emulate the economic success enjoyed by the Hualapai tribe when they allowed the construction of their world-famous skywalk in the Grand Canyon, a proposed Navajo tramway to transport tourists from the rim of the canyon to the confluence of the Little Colorado River with the Colorado River has met with fierce opposition from many outside special interest groups and has bitterly divided Navajos.

Thus, in a Letter to the Editor of the Navajo Times, a 63-year-old grandmother strongly pleads with those Navajos arguing against the tramway, especially the Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye, to drop their opposition to the project in the following words:

We, as grandparents, are going into our golden ages and we would like to plant a seed for our kids as we go into the dawn of our age. Every other year we lose elders along with the stories and the

ceremonies they hold. We are seriously losing our culture, our language, and our way of life but if our children come back to our homeland we will find a way to sustain them.

... I live by myself. All my children and grandchildren live in other states. I want my children and grandchildren to come home to me ... I want them to have opportunities at a job where they can go to work in the morning and come home every evening....

Nowadays, very few people have livestock and their livestock are limited. Our grazing grounds are depleted around the Grand Canyon project area. Every family that I know, their livestock are diminishing, especially the sheep and goats. To the people who oppose to the project, I ask in my mind, have they ever had any sacred corn pollen blessing, or know basic knowledge of the many areas of Navajo traditional ceremonies?

I asked this question because I don't see the opposition living among us in the Bodaway Gap Chapter, none....

We are tired of government handouts; it does not help us emotionally and spiritually. Our forefathers never asked for handouts from the chapter or our government in Window Rock. Why should we do that now?

We as a community at Bodaway Gap Chapter would love to see something great built to help sustain ourselves and to not continually rely on government handouts.

And in a follow-up letter to the editor, another Bodaway Gap older resident said, "I think of the children, future, that is why I support (Escalade). We have to come together with the non-Natives, just like the confluence." The letter writer then goes on to state:

Building the Escalade will bring people together from all over the world to enjoy the Grand Canyon, hear Navajo stories, learn about Navajo culture, and in exchange provide 3,500 Navajos with paychecks to sustain their families and culture.

In making a final decision to reject the Escalade proposal, the Navaho Nation President, Russell Begaye, seemed to completely ignore the above pleas from those local Navajos who had shown such very strong support for the project. In justifying his decision he said, "We ought not to sacrifice our cultural identity and our spiritual responsibilities for a few hundred jobs." However, this

rejection was at least in part due to the extreme pressure from outside interests that by now were much more powerful than in the past. Thus, extremely important was the opposition from the Hopi tribe that viewed the confluence of the two rivers as an especially sacred site as well as the very robust opposition from the river runners, and wilderness preservation groups that had lost the battle to save Glen Canyon from the dam that destroyed much of its beauty and archaeological treasures. However, an even more important reason could possibly have been the need for the tribe to avoid jeopardizing the support it was receiving from environmental groups to put pressure on the government to clean up the many remaining toxic uranium mine sites on the reservation.

The Havasupai leaders had also seen a need for maintaining such an alliance with their former environmental opponents in a fight to oppose the opening of a uranium mine upstream from their village that might release toxic waste into Havasu Creek, thus jeopardizing their community health and tourist industry.

As these and other tribes seek to obtain income and employment opportunities from tourism it is likely that there will be many unforeseen challenges to their ability to maintain their unique cultural identities as Native Americans, a problem that is addressed in my 1984 article on the effects of tourism on the eastern band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina and in my 2017 Navajo article.

**Source material for this 2020 Albuquerque SfAA presentation:**

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