

From the August 2000 Archives...An Interview with DR. RICHARD INGEBRETSSEN President of the Glen Canyon Institute

EDITOR'S NOTE: A Physician, a physicist, a devout Mormon, and an unbridled optimist, Dr. Richard Ingebretsen also wants to drain Lake Powell. In this July 2000 interview, he explains why...JS

Zephyr: Rich you're a very enthusiastic and passionate environmentalist and a devout Mormon in one of the most conservative and, some might say, anti-environmentalist states in the country. In light of all that, how do you remain so darn optimistic?

Rich: That's actually an easy answer. I have a very good feeling about people in general. I believe they'll do the right thing and the right thing is to protect and restore the environment. The LDS Church's views and doctrines, even though it doesn't actually take a political stand, are towards the environment and to protect God's creations. I was brought up in a home and a church environment where I believed that was correct. So I have a very positive feel that things will happen.

Zephyr: But in terms of the reality of it all, for instance, the entire Utah congressional delegation opposes a good wilderness bill. Congressman Hansen thinks the idea of draining Lake Powell is ridiculous. If you venture into southern Utah, wilderness is considered a four letter word. So how do you reconcile your activism with so many Mormons who consider such issues a threat to their lifestyle and culture?

Rich: Good will win out. Good is life and preserving life I really think people will see this. Politics is a different thing--politics is money. It's evil and corrupt. But people have good hearts and they know what's right. They'll see it. Even Jim Hansen will see it. He has an obligation as a politician to protect money. When he said that the fish of the Colorado River are trash, he was just being stupid. Honestly I don't look at those guys as real bright, so I don't worry about them. They're politicians.

But people know what's right. Honestly people are willing to make sacrifices if we give them good alternatives. It'll work.

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Zephyr: Okay...look at the people in Garfield County. I don't think, for the most part, it's greed that drives their opposition to environmental issues as much as the perceived threat of an assault on their lifestyle. How do you turn them around?

Rich: You're asking a question about education. My experience is, people are afraid of change, they're afraid of the future, of the unknown. That's the problem we have with Lake Powell. We have to teach people that these are correct and righteous principles and if we can do that, people will listen. Almost everyone I speak to about draining Lake Powell, afterwards supports it. There are always some people who will oppose things like this, but I guarantee you, if you can sit down with an opponent and have a rational conversation with them and show them that jobs will be preserved and still restore the river, most people aren't afraid. In this state, in particular, draining Lake Powell is a huge change and I don't blame people for being scared by it. I don't even mind Jim Hansen opposing it. As a politician he should oppose it--as a politician, maintaining the status quo is what politicians do. What I do object to is when people won't listen to the other side. That is a problem but we don't find it too often.

Zephyr: Let's go back to the origins of your interest in the reservoir.

You're the president of the Glen Canyon Institute. But your love for this place goes back to when you were a kid.

Rich: When I was a Boy Scout, we took a trip down to the new reservoir. It had barely begun to fill. We put in at Wahweap and went up the canyon. You could see that the reservoir was coming up, but most of the side canyons were untouched and lined with trees. The scoutmaster kept pointing as high up as you could see to where the lake would fill. I remember hiking up Forbidding Canyon to Rainbow Bridge. It was a long and hot hike and around each bend we hoped we'd see the bridge. Finally it came into view and it was just awe-inspiring. We climbed up on the bridge--it was scary as it could be--and then we came back down and splashed in the pools. Even then, I remember feeling sad that all this was going to be under water.

Later, we crossed the river and spent some time in an alcove and again I was reminded that all this would be under water too. My scoutmaster said, "Enjoy all this now, because next year it will be gone." That was hard.

I didn't go back for years, when the reservoir was full and I remember being in the boat, staring down into the water, trying to remember what was there. In the early 1990s, while I was in med school I became interested in the river and started reading about it. I heard about David Brower and the Sierra Club's tradeoff on Glen Canyon (In 1956, the Sierra Club agreed to not oppose a dam in Glen Canyon, if the Bureau of Reclamation would drop plans to build a dam on the Green River at Echo Park...JS).

In 1995, I founded the Glen Canyon Institute (GCI) and created a list of eleven or twelve goals. One of them was to raise the issue of draining Lake Powell, but another was to meet Brower. I had never even seen a photo of Brower and then a friend of mine lent me a book that had a likeness of Brower

in it. Here was this dynamic looking man with the white flowing hair. In the book was also a photo of Brower holding a 16 mm camera and I was determined to track down that film and publish it for everyone to see. I called the Sierra Club and they had no idea where the film was. They gave me Brower's number and this all led ultimately to a debate that GCI put together between Brower and Floyd Dominy, the former director of the Bureau of Reclamation. I got Floyd's address from the Bureau and sent him a letter and he accepted.

So they both came and I spent three days with them which was a wonderful experience. I can't tell you how neat that was. As for the film, Brower didn't know where it was. He sent me Phil Pennington's slide show on tape of "The Place No One Knew," and I have to say it was one of the few films I ever cried over. But I still wanted the Brower film. I got a call from John Elles, who was making a documentary of Marc Reisner's Cadillac Desert and he actually tracked it down. We debuted it in October 1996 as "The Lost Films of David Brower;" it was then that I looked at the last goal on my list and decided it was time to go after it--to drain Lake Powell.

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Zephyr: Others have dreamed of draining Lake Powell, but for most of us, it's always been the ultimate lost cause. What makes you think this is a goal that can actually be achieved?

Rich: I didn't know if it could be achieved. I didn't even know it was realistic. My girlfriend at the time pleaded with me not to use the words "drain Lake Powell" because she thought I would sound stupid. She said I'd lose all credibility.

I decided that instead of announcing that we wanted to drain Lake Powell, that we'd get everybody together and ask if it was possible. Is there a reason? Can we do it? So I invited everyone in the world I could think of who was associated with Glen Canyon to



a meeting in Salt Lake City. I invited environmentalists, I called the Bureau of Reclamation and asked them to send someone--they sent seven. At this gathering I stood up front and said, "I want to go after Lake Powell; is there a good reason to?" And this one guy from the Bureau stood up and said, "Yes...let me tell you some problems with Lake Powell." He told us the one big problem was the 18 million acre feet of water that had been absorbed by the reservoir's sandstone banks and the evaporative loss. In addition, efforts by BuRec to restore the beaches in the Grand Canyon through a controlled flood had evidently failed. And he said, "We're going to lose the Grand Canyon as well."

That night we had our press conference and announced we were going after Lake Powell. We had our ammunition and 1800 people showed up at Kingsbury Hall...standing room only. And they gave Brower a five minute standing ovation. It was wonderful. Then someone asked if any big environmental group supported us and Brower proposed we go to the Sierra Club board of directors. And they voted by acclamation to support us...of course that's after the big bribe and the...what was it? Half a million dollars? (Rich refers to a recent accusation by a Sierra Club member that David Brower offered the board \$250,000 to support a resolution to drain the Powell Reservoir. He thinks the accusation is as funny as it is ridiculous...JS)



I feel very good about the future and I can almost assure you that in 25 years, the draw-down of Powell will be during that period of time. And the Glen Canyon Institute is going to do everything in its power to see that it's restored. I look forward to the next 25 years...

Zephyr: Tell us about your relationship with Floyd Dominy.

Rich: I am a friend of Floyd Dominy and I'm happy to say that. As an individual he's far more colorful than Brower. David Brower is the visionary and his literary skills are overwhelming. Dominy has none of those skills. Dominy is nuts and bolts, he's a bureaucrat, but he's a funny guy. You would love to be around him. He told me a lot about his life and his heart. He's a distant man. He has no close friends. He won't even let his dog inside. He lives alone in this cold house that reminded me of a mausoleum. The dog came to the door with me and I said, "Mr. Dominy, do you want me to let the dog in?" and he said, "The dog's not allowed in. You can try but he won't come in."

And yet I have a good relationship with him and I keep in touch. I admire him, not for what he did, but for believing in what he did. You can't fault a man for taking his views to other people. He and Brower had a wonderful three days. They argued, especially about the Grand Canyon. Every time the topic came up, Dominy started screaming and pounding the table. After the debate one night, he accused Brower of lying about dams in the Grand Canyon. "You said they were going to be built inside the park and they weren't!" I remember Brower staring straight ahead while Dominy, on his right, was screaming in his ear. Brower didn't flinch.

Once I went back to Virginia to visit Dominy at his house. We watched an advance copy of the documentary film Cadillac Desert and he said, "You're not going to like what I say about Brower...I call him a sanctimonious bastard." Later during the film, Barry Goldwater gets on there and talks about how, if he could change one senate vote, he'd change his vote for Glen Canyon Dam. And Dominy said, "The only difference between that old man and me is that he's lost his mind." That's what he said.

Then I asked him a question, "David Brower makes the claim that you took delight in flooding Glen Canyon...is that true?" And he said, "I took absolute delight." But then he asked me how serious this effort was to drain Lake Powell and I told him it was quite serious. Dominy said, "Well you're doing it all wrong." We were at dinner now and he takes a napkin and draws the dam the side walls. He says, "It's 300 feet of reinforced concrete on those diversion tunnels. You can never drill them out. Just drill new ones around them. It's never been done before but it'll work...I've been thinking about it." And then he said something very stunning. He said, "I'm sorry about the destruction in the Grand Canyon. But is it so bad to have a trout stream down there?" And we said, "Yes."

Zephyr: One of the first times I saw you speak was a couple years ago in Moab. I remember someone asked if you really thought the lake would be drained and you replied, "Absolutely. There's no doubt in my mind." You were so confident, you didn't even pause. Why are you so confident?

Rich: One thing that I don't think people realize is that trends mean absolutely every-

thing. In medicine, stocks, our personal lives, our relationships...it's not where we are, but which way we're going. There is a huge trend toward the environment. We're doing more now than ever in history to preserve the lands. Now there is a huge trend toward restoring ecosystems, not just here in the U.S., but all over the world.

Now specifically, with Glen Canyon Dam, the sediment will do that...when is the question, not if. My opinion is, even without this movement to drain the reservoir, when there's enough sediment in there that the justification for the reservoir no longer exists, then it will go.

Zephyr: Just to clarify that comment, sediment doesn't have to fill the reservoir to render it useless?

Rich: It originally held 27 million acre feet of water. When the sediment reduces the capacity of the reservoir and can't meet the needs of the lower basin, then any argument to keep the reservoir will be gone. As for power, that structure never existed for power. So because of the huge trend to drain it and the sediment, it's an absolute inevitability.

Zephyr: What are some of the other economic and scientific and political reasons why the lake should be drained?

Rich: The reservoir is there for a SINGLE purpose and we need to remind ourselves the way Los Angeles reminded us last November when they said, "Please drain it. We need the water." It is there as a reservoir to hold water for the Lower Basin States. The Upper Basin States don't use the water and they'll never use it. When it no longer meets the needs of the Lower Basin, it will go and that's what will drain Lake Powell.

As for economics, once that happens there are no economics and it will go. Evaporation? In water year 1995 they measured a loss of 667,000 acre feet of water lost to evaporation. I asked to Dominy about that; they knew it would happen. Then there was another 225,000 acre feet lost to bank storage.

But the other thing that will happen, when they can no longer assure the Lower Basin that the reservoir can provide water during a drought, they'll just say, "Just give us the water." Why lose a million acre feet of water when it isn't providing us any benefits?

Zephyr: Who exactly in Los Angeles is asking for the reservoir to be pulled down?

Rich: The commissioners of the Lower Basin. It happened at the Colorado River Users' Meeting in October.

Zephyr: Do you think you'll see this in your lifetime?

Rich: Oh absolutely. Our effort will provide a sound economic and scientific basis that will argue forever that there is a reason to drain it, rather than just saying, "I want to see Glen Canyon again." That accounts for something but you have to give to them numbers and logic. As long as you're applying pressure and you have the numbers, you can look for the weak moments. Look at L.A. wanting the water...believe me, we're going to emphasize this in the fall.

We spoke at a meeting in Las Vegas where the seven Basin commissioners were in attendance. That was historic. They asked us to speak on why we should drain Lake Powell. The commissioners of the Upper and Lower Basin states were there. These are THE water users and they came up afterwards and made some very telling comments to us. They want to see our document (the interim draft release of the citizens' environmental assessment) in the fall and they said this was going to help them manage the Colorado River in a different way. This is a huge step for them to say that an environmental group is going to help manage the Colorado River by the work we're doing.

Zephyr: How consistent is wanting to drain Lake Powell with early Mormon teachings about stewardship of the lands.

Rich: It's not just consistent with early Mormon teachings, it's consistent with current Mormon teachings. We are taught from a very early age that God's creations are sacred. What people always have to weigh in the balance is, what we're doing is destroying God's creations. We are stewards of the land. It's true that it says we're given "dominion" over the land, but if you look at the word, it doesn't mean power, it means stewardship over it. At the Mormonism and the Environment Symposium, (former SLC Mayor) Ted Wilson got up and said, "I'm a Mormon and I'm an environmentalist." I'd alter that to say, "I'm a Mormon; therefore I'm an environmentalist." The teachings are that consistent. There is nothing in the teachings of the Latter Day Saints that would give you the opinion that anything else is true.

Zephyr: You just came back from Alaska...

Rich: Alaska is pristine. You know, I have a view that we should preserve land for animals and not even let people in. Alaska has that. They call them preserves and people can walk in there, but it's like walking on tundra for 300 miles. There are no roads and just huge places where there's nobody but the animals. And that's the way it should be. It was just stunning. Absolutely wonderful.

Zephyr: What do you think Utah will look like in 25 years?

Rich: I can remember back 25 years. You know what? I'm not disheartened over the last 25 years. I've seen a lot of good happen. Life has its ups and downs. I would make some changes but I think life is good. We have to fight for the earth. We have to drain Lake Powell. We have to save wilderness. But the people will do that. We'll make things happen. I think the state is going to grow in the metropolitan areas. Moab is going to grow. The Zephyr will become the state's largest newspaper...I feel very good about the future and I can almost assure you that in 25 years, the draw-down of Powell will be during that period of time. And the Glen Canyon Institute is going to do everything in its power to see that it's restored. I look forward to the next 25 years...I think it's going to be fun. Don't you?

POSTSCRIPT: Dr. Ingebretsen is still the president of the Glen Canyon Institute and still believes he will see Glen Canyon, or at least part of it, restored in his lifetime.