

Title: Experiencing Echo Park

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As a historian, my “field work” is expected to take place in library archives where I paw through dusty boxes of correspondence, newspaper articles, and diaries in windowless and temperature-controlled rooms. But, as a historian who studies the history of the Colorado River Basin I have expanded my sources to include the rivers of the Basin themselves. I came to my dissertation research through floating rivers; as a river guide on the Green, Yampa, and Colorado for twelve years, the lived experience of place drives what and how I write about the Colorado River Basin.

During the process of researching the roots of my recreational experience I discovered that what I—and many others—do for fun is an activity that has shaped not only the landscape of the Colorado River Basin, but also the development of American environmentalism. Both my research and my field work have centered on the Green and Yampa rivers of Dinosaur National Monument on the border of northwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. Echo Park, located at the confluence of these two rivers and at the heart of the national monument, was the site of a heated battle over a proposed dam in the mid-1950s. In order to gain support for their anti-dam stance, the Sierra Club offered whitewater rafting trips through Dinosaur so that participants could gain the tactile experience of floating through wild desert canyons. These trips evoked the range of human emotions from awe to fear to wonder; it was these emotions, tied to the physical experience of river running, that prompted trip participants and those who saw films or read accounts of Dinosaur’s rivers to take action. The physical and emotional experience of floating the Yampa and Green played a pivotal role in fueling the successful anti-dam campaign in what has come to be known as the American environmental movement’s “finest hour to date.” And it was, as I have discovered in the course of my research, the river runners, particularly the father-son team of Bus and Don Hatch, who led the defeat of Echo Park Dam through the physical and emotional experience of Dinosaur’s rivers.

This experience has taught me that we need to bridge the gap between the academic and recreational worlds—two disciplines that have ignored each other for too long, to the detriment of both sides. My presentation will explore the relationship between whitewater rafting and environmental advocacy from the Echo Park controversy in the early 1950s to the passage of the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act in 1968. River runners have shaped, and continue to shape, the rivers of the American West, and recognizing the history of this advocacy can help recreationists be better informed and more effective advocates. Experiencing a place matters a great deal—both to the past and to the present.