

STRAINING FOR SILENCE

by Roger Clark

Helicopter rotors slapped air somewhere across the Canyon as I took in the view from Point Sublime. This hard-to-reach spot juts out from the North Rim, some two dozen miles west of Bright Angel Point. I stood there in solitude this fall, far away from bustling visitors and busses, reflecting on topography and time.

Twenty-one years earlier and a mile below where I stood, a deep staccato noise rose above the roar of Crystal Rapid. We shipped our oars and gazed upward as a giant chopper carried away wreckage. A helicopter and an airplane collided on the day we launched our river trip, six days before and ninety-eight miles upriver. There were no survivors. One of our guides was a close personal friend to one of the pilots.

Sadly it took a tragedy before the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) felt compelled to regulate scenic air tours over the Grand Canyon. Until that day, FAA believed that “visual flight rules” were sufficient to ensure the safety of more than 100,000 people per year who took “the ride of a lifetime.”

The National Park Service (NPS) had convinced Congress a decade earlier that aircraft noise was polluting “natural quiet” in the Canyon. In the months following the collision, former Trust president Ed Norton worked tirelessly with Senator McCain to pass the 1987 National Parks Overflights Act. The law gave NPS authority to develop rules for the “substantial restoration of natural quiet” to Grand Canyon, pending a safety review by the FAA.

Protecting national park values is the mission of NPS. However, skyrocketing numbers of scenic air tours meant that FAA was, in effect, doing the park’s job. Because FAA’s purpose included promoting commercial aviation, the two agencies (and their respective constituencies) have been at odds ever since.

After two decades of studies, reports, rules, definitions, and lawsuits, NPS and FAA have yet to adopt a final rule to regulate airspace over Grand Canyon. Interim rules prohibit aircraft from flying below the rim, establish flight-free zones and curfews at dawn and sunset, and set temporary limits on the number of air tours permitted to fly over the canyon.

Monitoring and modeling studies show that, despite a dramatic rise in the volume of air tours,

AIRCRAFT NOISE IS POLLUTING

“natural quiet” IN THE CANYON

interim measures may be holding noise pollution to a level needed to meet NPS’ definition of “natural quiet.” Their objective is to have at least 50% of the Park free from air tour noise at least 75% of the time. What remains to be decided is how to make a minimal restoration of natural quiet become a “substantial restoration.”

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Beginning in 2004, at the urging of Senator McCain, agencies and interest groups entered into an alternative dispute resolution process with a goal of adopting final rules by sometime in 2008. That process is nearly complete. Currently, it appears that two of the seven alternatives being considered would substantially restore natural quiet to the Grand Canyon.

One alternative would close two of the main flight corridors at different times during the year, allowing hikers to enjoy Hermit and Tanner trails for a few months free from air tour noise. Another, recommended by NPS in 1994, would permanently close the “Dragon Corridor.” It is the route that extends out over the Tonto Trail, crosses the river above Crystal Rapid, and shoots a seemingly invisible conveyor belt of helicopters toward Point Sublime, where my ears strained to hear silence last fall.

Air tour owners claim such measures would put them out of business. They made similar claims in 1987 when opposing any regulation of scenic overflights. ▶