

Gulliford's Travels: A column for the Durango Herald

Andrew Gulliford

Stateline Marina, Lake Powell, Arizona

What was I doing in 100 degree August heat wearing river sandals and walking the shores of Lake Powell through cockleburs, thistles, tumbleweed and tamarisk? Why, trolling for trash, of course! I had joined Volunteers-in-Parks for the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area and we were aboard the 52-foot long Trash Tracker Houseboat patrolling the coves and bays of Lake Powell and collecting everything from cigarette butts to junk the size of refrigerators.

Our fleet included a houseboat complete with gas barbeque grill, two bathrooms and two refrigerators, an aging, aluminum National Park Service flat-bottomed barge named "The Eliminator," and a battered fiberglass motorboat christened "The Minnow." With two captains, Bruce and Pat George from Camp Verde, Arizona and a four-person crew, our goal was to scour the southern shoreline of Lake Powell in a unique eco-vacation whose goal was to give back to public lands.

Conceived nineteen years ago by Steve Ward of Lake Powell Resorts and Marinas (ARAMARK), Lake Powell's concessionaire, the Trash Tracker program has been enormously successful in cleaning up what environmentalists have dubbed "Lake Foul." ARAMARK provides the houseboat, the runabout, all gas, ice, and coffee; the sturdy NPS "Eliminator" contains brushes, shovels, sledges, hammers, wrenches, hacksaws, grabens and long-handled nets, and volunteers provide the enthusiasm and muscle on five-day trips. In summer the Trash Tracker moors out of Stateline Marina at the southern end of the reservoir and in spring and fall it's located at the upper end at Bullfrog.

Volunteer and third-grade teacher Eric Martinez from Yucaipa, California smiles and says, "Trash Tracker launch day is my favorite day of the year. We're on a houseboat with a captain and it's free." Martinez explains, "We like to find things that are unusual," and Captain Bruce George adds, "The bigger the better." Indeed, it's a lot like treasure hunting and beers found floating in abandoned ice chests do taste better than those purchased at Basha's Supermarket in Page.

The Colorado River drains 246,000 square miles and Lake Powell's 1,960 mile shoreline is longer than the entire coast of California, Oregon, and Washington. Plastic water bottles abound, and Pat George notes, "We've found every kind of toy you can imagine and it's amazing how many different kind of balls there are." Every day brings excitement for new finds both twenty yards or so above the water line and even a mile back into side canyons. On previous

trips in 113 degree heat the crew found a 55 gallon drum full of sand and muck, a houseboat waterslide a mile away from water, the rusty drive chain off a Dodge half track truck, refrigerators, ping-pong tables, boats, and a full set of golf clubs.

Golf balls are as ubiquitous as beer cans. Each morning we had breakfast, boarded the Eliminator and headed out to locate debris from *Americanus Slobvious*, that unique human species who frequents Lake Powell, illegally sets off fireworks, builds and abandons numerous fire rings, and leaves pounds of human feces on sandbars and beaches. His tracks are easy to find.

Despite rigorous enforcement of “Leave No Trace” backcountry ethics on Western wilderness rivers where porta-potties and fire pans are mandatory and used by river runners, anything goes at Lake Powell. And it shows. The amount of garbage recovered annually by the Trash Tracker program averages between fifty and sixty thousand pounds.

Tiffany Mapel, a volunteer and an 8th grade Miller Middle School teacher from Durango, believes, “Some people shouldn’t be allowed outdoors.” Yet she doesn’t get disheartened, and in 2004 Mapel flew back to Washington, D.C. to represent Trash Tracker volunteers at a Take Pride in America awards ceremony where the ARAMARK/NPS program received a national award as an outstanding volunteer opportunity. Mapel says that volunteering on the lake is “my favorite part of the summer,” and she especially likes “getting out on the boat and seeing things you wouldn’t normally see like alcoves, pools, and all kinds of lizards and birds.”

On our shift we patrolled Gunsight and West Canyons, Friendship Cove, and the Main Channel. We found busted water balloons, air mattresses, sandals, sunglasses, tent stakes, bras, bullets, caps, cigars, and vintage fish lures. Our biggest find was the first day out when we became as excited as pirates who’d just boarded a cruise ship. Off the Main Channel a flash of white plastic reflecting the sun meant a quick turn into a small rocky outcrop where we hit the jackpot—the entire top of a houseboat, the flying bridge, had blown off in one of Lake Powell’s legendary windstorms. There it was. A twisted pile of fiberglass, metal supports, wiring, plastic, and even the upper bridge complete with steering wheel. What a catch!

We fairly flew off the aluminum barge to gather up the debris, and it took four of us to wrestle the longer pieces out of the sand. I was prepared for rattlesnakes hiding in tamarisk along the beaches, but no one had warned me of rats. When a brown rodent came out of the muck and quickly crossed my Teva-clad foot, I jumped back, yelling.

Our sense of teamwork and camaraderie was cemented that morning when we filled the Eliminator with our first load. We worked as an efficient corps, jumping off boats with trash bags in hand, walking beaches and sandstone ledges at different levels, splitting up, meeting again, eager to share our finds. Enduring the afternoon heat, volunteer and IBM employee Dave

Hauswald from Louisville, Colorado, laughed and said, “Lake Powell is about the only place where cold water tastes better than cold beer.”

And it wasn't all work. There was time to splash and swim in the 80 degree lake under a deep blue sky. At night we slept on the houseboat roof with an unimpeded view of the Milky Way. There was time to stop and catch striped bass when we spied a school of stripers boil the water directly in front of us, and time to enter a narrow grotto and climb side canyons. Other boaters helped us locate trash and shared their Gatorade and ice. Lake Powell isn't the sole habitat for *Americanus Slobvius*. With 1.5 million annual visitors, some things just blow off boats.

But it's way past time for the National Park Service to require a Leave No Trace ethic for all boaters. Fire pans should be mandatory and provided with each houseboat rental, and the lake needs a serious recycling program. Hopefully the next generation of houseboats will have their own on-board can crushers and shredders for plastic bottles.

Eco-activist Ed Abbey hated Glen Canyon Dam and he called flooding Glen Canyon an abomination. Indeed, the lake is an artifact of mid-20th century governmental hubris built before the national Environmental Policy and Endangered Species Acts. River runners and environmentalists may deplore Lake Powell while houseboaters and fishermen may think its heaven on earth. Whatever you believe, you can either be part of the problem or part of the solution. Hopefully, next year I'll be back aboard the Trash Tracker doing my part to clean up public lands.

Applications are due February 1st each year for the April-November volunteer season. Questions may be directed to Trash Tracker Reservations at 928-608-6350 or see <http://www.nps.gov/glca/supportyourpark/volunteer.htm>

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