



Warm Springs Rapid, Yampa River  
May 15, 2023, approx. 26 [acre-ft per minute]  
Photo by: Carlos Florey

## A Battle for Echo Park

**By Jord Gertson, Hydrologist, Upper Arkansas Water Conservancy District**

While exploring the Yampa River in my kayak this spring, I attempted to suppress my adrenaline from the rowdy peak flows and took note of the shear vertical rock walls that bound the river. I thought, “Surely others have surveyed the possibilities that the winding canyons could make for an extensive water storage project.” When visiting Mathers Cave in Dinosaur National Monument (DNM), an informative kiosk mentioned that there were two potential storage projects proposed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) in the early 1940s, Split Mountain Dam and Echo Park Dam. These structures would have provided indirect beneficial uses to Colorado, if constructed; otherwise, downstream states were the main beneficiaries. Yet, past events set the stage for a historic conservation battle over the proposed dams.

In 1915, the largest known cache of dinosaur fossils was memorialized as Dinosaur National Monument, the 30<sup>th</sup> Park established under National Park Service (NPS) care. The 1922 Colorado River Compact framed water decisions for the future. From 1930 to 1950, NPS visitation increased over 2,000%. As wartime rations were lifted, Americans took advantage of low travel costs to go on vacations where they developed formative childhood memories and experiences that blossomed into a love affair with the NPS. The American economic and civic boom reached a crescendo in the late 1940s-50s, creating the opportunity for organized public activism.

In the early 1940s the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Reclamation hatched the Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP). The CRSP was introduced to Congress in 1953 as “Natural Menace becomes a National Resource” With power development being directly related to national security and irrigation being at the forefront of the many beneficial uses of water storage. The project created public outcry as two water storage structures were proposed within the boundaries of Dinosaur National Park – Split Mountain and Echo Park dams.

A coalition of opposition formed within 10 organizations: the Sierra Club, American Museum of Natural History, American Nature Association, National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, Izaak Walton League, National Parks Association, American Planning and Civic Association, the Conservation

Foundation, and the Wilderness society. As these organizations developed a perspective of environmental gratitude from resource protection, they also coined the effort as a “Movement.”

The Sierra Club took the lead in generating public activism to portray the dams as a “waste” and “unnecessary.” The coalition made a conscious choice not to fight the entire CRSP project and to focus on the effort to protect DNM. The coalition challenged technical data (evaporation rates) and determined alternate sites that were not within a national monument. Yet, mobilizing people to write letters, send telegrams, visit the monument, and encourage friends and family to vocally oppose the two dams that threatened the monument became the first victory of the environmental movement.

In the end, the environmental groups opposing the project in the 1950s promised not to resist the construction of Glen Canyon Dam if Echo Park and Split Mountain dams were abandoned as part the CRSP. A coalition of budding environmental agencies sparked public interest, lobbied congressional support and successfully defeated the proposed public policy, and birthed the environmental movement.

I am grateful for the preserved unique native landscapes at Dinosaur National Monument. Preservation efforts have spawned inspiration, education and enjoyment of a wilderness river trail that provides solitude and escape for generations to come.

I have also come to learn that water storage projects are essential to establishing resilience to climatic variability. Environmental stewardship efforts should act collectively on solutions to complex challenges that focus on water quantity, quality, ecosystems, infrastructure and governance – where the value, functionality, longevity and necessity of water and energy projects are broadly evaluated for the best possible future outcome.

Sources:

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Jenson, D.E. “Dinosaur Dammed: An Analysis of The Fight to Defeat Echo Park Dam,” Dissertation submitted to faculty of The University of Utah, December 2014