

# The Place I'll Never Know

Some thoughts on learning how to be a nature writer

Linda M. Hasselstrom

## I.

According to the inscription, I bought *The Place No One Knew* on April 29, 1968 for my first husband, probably as a gift for our second anniversary. The book consists of photographs of Glen Canyon by Eliot Porter with his description of the canyon before it was flooded in 1963. Each photograph is accompanied by text, often quotations from the works of writers or politicians about the West. The book begins in a fashion I find typical of many Sixties environmental manifestoes: “Glen Canyon died in 1963 and I was partly responsible for its needless death. So were you.”

At that time, we were graduate students at the University of Missouri in steamy Columbia. Almost at once, I began using the thin Sierra Club book with its glowing photographs as a refuge from unpleasant reality, staring at the picture of a waterfall in Cathedral in the Desert. I could imagine myself there, feel the fine mist on my parched skin, feel the sandstone against my back as I sat in the sand. “Remember these things lost” said a line on the facing page.

The book drew me out of my self-absorption and into a broader awareness of the world and my responsibilities to it. To be fair to my youthful self, though, I had a lot to be absorbed about. I had moved from my South Dakota ranch to the south where I found that, in that part of Missouri, local people still remembered which county fought on which side in the Civil War, and made judgments accordingly. I'd been married just two years to the man I supposed would be The One True Love Of My Life. During our first year together, he started one or more affairs with other women, changed majors from Literature to Philosophy, and began singing jazz in a bar. I worked two jobs so we could support his three children from the first marriage he'd promised to uphold when he was a Baptist minister. We were always broke, but I bought him a fine suit and a ruffled shirt for his bar gig. His clothes cost more than our groceries every month. Like most folks, I lived through all this, and still remember the shocks, but this was my immersion education into other cultures, other viewpoints, other ways of directing the world. As is the case with everyone, events I recall and some that I have mercifully forgotten helped create the person and the writer I am today.

My copy of *The Place No One Knew* cost \$3.95, and delivered another jolt as two ideas collided in my mind: that places this beautiful existed in the desert and that they were destroyed so that morons could race around in speedboats throwing beer cans in their wake.

I must have heard the word “environmentalist” during those years in Missouri, but I hadn’t begun identifying myself as one. My background was in ranching, and I’d grown up learning that protecting water, grass and wildlife was part of my job. Involved in my new life, I was busy teaching journalism at a women’s college, and trying to sort out my feelings about the war in Viet Nam. My viewpoints broadened exponentially. For the first time I did many things: met and formed friendships with black people; read books on political subjects; marched against the war; helped edit an underground newspaper, and sampled drugs, usually by accident. Besides “expanding my horizons” in beneficial ways, I did plenty of stupid things, but I learned that most of them weren’t irrevocable. I could and did recover from temporary idiocy, but I learned not to do particularly destructive actions more than once.

Still, the photographs stayed in my mind, becoming part of my personal definition of what it meant to lose part of ourselves, an irreplaceable part of our heritage.

Meanwhile, life went on. With that first husband I moved back to South Dakota to “repair our marriage.” When it ripped apart on the rocks of his constant infidelity, I retreated—as I thought of it then—to the family ranch. There I learned more about ranching while teaching myself to write, and discovered a passion that would last. During the next thirty years, I shed the husband and thousands of possessions, but I kept the book. And I learned that coming back to the ranch offered healing for the wounds I carried.

Defiantly, I began to call myself an environmentalist, and to discuss with my father and other ranchers how our attention to the land made us stewards who should be respected by other folks who cared about their surroundings. Nationally, groups such as The Sierra Club, Greenpeace, Earth First! were making headlines--and beginning to understand how much money could be made— by informing the public how finite is our little world. Many of these folks sneered at ranchers and farmers and called us enemies of the land where we had spent generations making a living while conserving the unique ecosystem of the grasslands.

Those who made headlines talking about Nature, we ranchers began to say, were those who had never lived here and never depended on the land for their income.

Joining several local activist groups, I spent thousands of hours and drove thousands of miles volunteering on specific projects: trying to get a gold-mining company to stop dumping pollution in our creeks; trying to stop loggers from clear-cutting the sharp slopes of the Black Hills; trying to create mineral severance taxes that reflected the real profits these companies made. Our efforts did help stop an international company from building a uranium mine, mill, and waste dump in the southwestern corner of the state—though a drop in the price of uranium helped. State tourism officials suggested several times that I “go back where I came from.” Doggedly, I kept reminding them that I’d lived in South Dakota since I was four years old, as if length of residence determined one’s right to comment on the place.

Our most violent, uninformed, and vicious opposition usually came from people who lived in the neighborhood and knew my relatives, people who should have worked with us to protect our mutual home. A couple of people whose voices I recognized from acrimonious public meetings left death threats on my answering-machine tape, saying I was responsible for their menfolk not getting jobs in the uranium industry. I called them back to explain that I really didn't influence the price of uranium and that if I handed the tape to the FBI they'd be in real trouble, but they didn't believe me in either case.

Sometimes in my writing I pointed out the irony of these attitudes flourishing near Mount Rushmore, the Shrine to Democracy.

Still, reading newspapers and books written by environmental activists from other regions, I never felt the sense of kinship I felt with my neighbors, even the antagonistic ones whose fear of change I could understand. Little of what I read about the "wilderness" or "Nature" or the "environment" related to the grasslands where we lived; most of the fighting that drew media attention occurred over spectacular desert or mountain landscapes. Eventually, I stopped describing myself as an environmentalist when it seemed that the term had come to designate people who offered judgments about the fate of a region without every having lived or earned a living there.

I began to fear, though, that I would live to see the center of the nation become a focus for the kind of development and controversy occurring elsewhere. As Glen Canyon dam had drowned those glowing walls in water and sludge, the grasslands would be submerged in asphalt by people who had no understanding of its worth. When it was too late, they would wail and lament and publish beautiful picture books about what it had been like. Paradise thrown away.

Now, forty years later, coffee table books with gorgeous photographs of the plains appear yearly from the savvy publishers who see what's happening. Some of my friends are writing the lush descriptions for those books.

After returning to the ranch in South Dakota, I began to write about the issues I thought were important, began to try to convince residents of the Great Plains that we need to protect our lands. Meanwhile, state officials advertised the state as the perfect location for companies that wanted honest, hard-working employees willing to take low wages without complaint. These folks used to own or work on farms, explained the promotional literature, but were losing them to multinational corporate farming.

Several times, on business or vacation trips, I visited the southwest, where motor boats churned the waters of Lake Powell over Glen Canyon. I learned to admire and respect the desert and the people who love it, including the pueblo dwellers, while acknowledging that I am and will remain a child of the arid grasslands, not the desert.

Once, during my wild youth, I even fell to my knees on Glen Canyon Dam Bridge. As tourists stared, I hollered, “All we need here God, is one little precision earthquake.” They edged away from me on the bridge, looking over their shoulders. Apparently few of them recognized the words of the Mormon activist Seldom Seen Smith in Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

And I cheered in 1981 when Earth First! made worldwide headlines by unfurling a three-hundred-foot plastic banner that looked like a giant crack in the face of the dam. That’s my idea of brilliant activism: it was dramatic, funny and didn’t injure anyone.

I never accepted invitations to make a float trip over the wonders Porter had pictured; I didn’t think I could stand it. Through the years, I didn’t pay much attention to the controversies over the dam and arguments over removing it. Instead, I focused my attention on the country where I lived and worked, where, I believed, I might actually accomplish something.

Occasionally, I paged through the book, shaking my head. I tried not to think about sludge filling those cathedral canyons, but the images crowded into my mind: condoms, soft drink cans, water ski fragments, plastic forks. Reading articles about garbage and the bulging, gurgling landfills that surround our cities, watching as city streets fill with junk tossed away by thoughtless consumers, I mourned both the beautiful places and the ordinary places that had once been lovely. Not only under the waters behind the dam, but everywhere, trash seemed to reign.

Some environmentalists, I think, began to relish those ghastly fantasies, to fashion them into clubs, weapons with which to bludgeon ordinary people, trying to drive them toward environmental activism. Many times, it seemed to me, people who counseled us to consider consequences before we acted were shouted down, battered about the heads and shoulders with the latest environmental disaster. Some environmentalists seemed to abhor the idea of compromise so deeply that they loathed even a reference to any view that opposed their own of The Right Way To Do Things. Glen Canyon Dam became a heat-seeking missile blowing away differing opinions.

## II.

Finding the book after yet another move, this time from Cheyenne, Wyoming, back to the South Dakota ranch I now own, set me thinking about the forty years it has been in my possession. For nearly a decade, drought has been pounding the West, but the development hasn’t been slowed by thoughts of the future. Developers busy selling “ranchettes” don’t seem to care about the folks who think they are going to live happily in those subdivisions scattered on the horizon, miles from the nearest town. The uninformed new residents who are planting trees around their grasslands homes, watering those ugly green lawns, don’t realize that the blowing dust and firestorms of the past few years are probably only the beginning. Soon they are likely to be perched on dusty little knobs surrounded by dead sticks. If gas prices keep rising, they may be packing their lunches for the long hike to their jobs in town.

We've grown comfortable with our greed, grown accustomed to having anything we want without considering the consequences. Stuff a check to that environmental group into the mailbox on our way to work in the SUV while talking on the hands-free phone. Those news stories of fires burning entire herds of cattle, of forests flaming and subdivisions turned to ash, didn't happen in our neighborhood. A lot of environmental organizations are so rich they keep lobbyists in Washington to whine permanently about the latest problem. Turn the page. Change the channel.

During these dry years, while I was raving about subdivisions and trees and lawns, desert folks who probably sharpened their environmental teeth on *The Place No One Knew*, just as I did, have been busy. *High Country News*, one of my chief sources of reliable information about the condition of the West since I discovered the outside world, has been reporting on the effects of that drought on the accursed and filthy waters of Lake Powell. Backpackers have explored parts of Glen Canyon exposed by the drought.

In 2005, when drought had pulled the reservoir level down ninety feet, Jim Stiles, long-time editor of the *Canyon Country Zephyr*, one of the strongest voices for the environment in the southwest, took a boat to Lake Powell. He located the approximate position of the Cathedral in the Desert and floated over it. Two years later, when drought had dropped Lake Powell another sixty feet, Stiles went back with Rich Ingebretsen, the president of the Glen Canyon Institute, which wants to breach Glen Canyon Dam. They parked the boat and walked in. "The dark desert varnish had not faded in 40 years," Stiles wrote. "The striations that were so clearly visible" in the photograph on p. 158 of the book were just as sharply defined. "And it was still there," he said, "just waiting for Nature to expose the rock and for us to return."

Edward Abbey had said that the cathedral and the other wonders of Glen Canyon weren't gone, that they were in "liquid storage" and he was more right than he could know. "Nature was already at work" said Stiles, and though they came upon old beer cans, ropes, other debris from the "motorized recreation," what surprised them was "how little garbage there was. The Cathedral in the Desert, without any help from us, was, in the most tranquil way imaginable, restoring itself. All it needed from us was time. And there's the rub.

As Stiles noted, the spring runoff was massive, and the reservoir has risen, so Cathedral in the Desert may never emerge again. By May of 2008, houseboats were again floating above it. But "for now," Stiles noted, he could take comfort in knowing it really is down there, "waiting for an enlightened future to let her shine again."

### III.

"You can't go home again," says the famous warning, and since I've tried, I know what the warning means. Looking at a photograph of my first husband with his latest wife (number five?) I feel nothing but pity for her. I finally paid off the thousands of dollars in debts he left behind. I buried

his neglected dog. I can even admit that our seven years together provided me with much that I still value, though most of it's intangible. For one thing, I can recognize the type of male he represents at forty paces. For another, I'm still in touch with his children, who say they have two mothers and no father.

But I am living again on the family ranch where I grew up. Similarly, I can still relish my vintage copy of *The Place No One Knew*. Recently, researching the history of the dam, I discovered that the Sierra Club had originally opposed the entire dam-building project that included Glen Canyon. Believing it was more important to keep dams out of Dinosaur National Monument, the group participated in a deal: gave up Glen Canyon so as to look more reasonable to the nation's public. So the dam was already under construction when David Brower visited the area, and produced the book in a frantic effort to stop the work—too late.

This trip back in time has strengthened some lessons I'd learned in a dozen other ways in sixty years of life. The story provides several useful lessons for women, environmentalists and --particularly--writers.

Despite the glorious photographs, the Sierra Club made a deal that might be described as less than honest. Was the book funded by guilt? Beautiful photographs and hyperbole did help educate us, but also warn us to beware pretty pictures and purple prose. I've never joined the Sierra Club; never will.

Guilt, I've decided, may not be a good motivator, especially these days. "Glen Canyon died in 1963 and I was partly responsible for its needless death," wrote David Brower. "So were you." Such language brought in thousands of memberships and made the group one of the most powerful lobbying agencies in the nation. Did it also make people buy the book and then have another drink or another toke because they weren't given a viable option for action?

When reading or writing an environmental story, I try to pay as much attention to the details as I pay to the sounds of an autumn day in areas where I know rattlesnakes might lie. And for the same reasons: failure to pay attention can be dangerous. Who's telling the story? What connection do they have to the characters in it? Is there a profit of some kind to be made? What do I, or what does the story's writer, know about the place where the story takes place? It's easy to accuse, to hurl blame, but often difficult to really pin down a cause.

Ask yourself if knowing who's responsible is as important as offering a solution, suggesting ways we might fix what's wrong. Do you use your energy for blame? Or remedy?

Also, I try to consider the likely consequences of a story, try to understand as much as I can about the history of a problem before yelling protests or loading the weapons, figurative or otherwise.

Let's not say the damage is permanent, or the place is completely ruined for all time if that may not be the case. Let's look at the alternatives, at similar cases. Above all, let's allow the reader some way to participate in this story, or in creating a cure for this situation. Offer some good cheer along with the dose of cough syrup.

Maybe we should spend more time learning from the universe than trying to make decisions about it. And perhaps we should have more confidence in nature. I suppose it's sexist to refer to Mother Nature, so I must say that perhaps, left to its own devices, nature can repair the damage we've caused more quickly than we think.

At the "cracking" of Glen Canyon Dam on the Spring Equinox, 1981, Edward Abbey said, "The good news I bring will certainly come to pass. The collapse of Glen Canyon Dam is as inevitable as the rising of the moon, or the revival of spring, or the flow of the river home to the sea. . . ." Given enough time, said Abbey, the river itself would be the agency to remove the dam. "Open once again to sunlight, these canyons will awake from the dead. The willows and the cottonwoods will return, the ricegrass and the cliffrose and the juniper, and the birds will come back. . . ."

That doesn't mean we should stop fighting environmental disasters caused by human greed. "Oppose," said Abbey. "Oppose the destruction of our homeland by these alien forces from Houston, Tokyo, Manhattan, D. C. And the Pentagon. . . . God bless America, let's save some of it. Love the Land—or Leave it alone."

And we can't stop writing about what's gone wrong. But let's also write about what's gone right with humans and nature. Let's celebrate the successes.

Perhaps the most important thing we can do is to enjoy the places where we live, to carry that enjoyment with us into our writing, so that it speaks to the people who might be persuaded to help us. Another Sierra Club book of the same era, also featuring photographs by Eliot Porter, was titled by an apt quotation from Henry David Thoreau: *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World*. The two books stand side by side in the bookcase closest to my computer, where I can refresh myself with their pages when the work grows depressing.

Abbey said it too: "Enjoy our great American West—climb those mountains, run those rivers, hike those canyons, explore those forests, and share in the bounty of wilderness, friendship, love, and the common effort to save what we love. Do this and we will be strong, and bold, and happy, we will outlive our enemies. . . ."

## Sources:

*The Place No One Knew* by Eliot Porter, David Ross Brower and the Glen Canyon Institute. 1968, The Sierra Club

*The History of Glen Canyon Dam* by Richard Ingebretsen, [www.canyoncountryzephyr.com](http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com) Feb-March, 2002

In 1981, the environmentalist group Earth First! launched itself by unfurling a three-hundred foot plastic “crack” along the front of Glen Canyon Dam. In 1996, the movement to drain Lake Powell began to gather momentum when the national board of the Sierra Club, under David Bower’s urging, adopted the position that Lake Powell should be drained.

[www.livingrivers.org](http://www.livingrivers.org)

“All we need here God, is one little precision earthquake.”

—Seldom Seen Smith, from *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, quoted on the “The Edward Abbey 1982 Western Wilderness Calendar,” my favorite calendar of all time; had “B. Traven’s birthday” about once a month. Completed in 1964, Glen Canyon Dam bridge is 1,721 feet long and about 700 feet over the Colorado River. Before the bridge, it was a 192-mile drive to the other side of the canyon.

“The brief but wonderful return of Cathedral in the Desert,” Jim Stiles, July 16, 2008, Writers on the Range, [www.hcn.org](http://www.hcn.org).

Ed Abbey’s remarks were edited by Daniel J. Philippon and published as “Edward Abbey’s Remarks at the Cracking of Glen Canyon Dam” in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11.2 (Summer 2004), Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, pp. 161-166.