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JOEL CONNELLY

Friday, June 3, 2005

In the Northwest: Conservation icon plans a final campaign: Sequoia



By [JOEL CONNELLY](#)
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER COLUMNIST

MINHAM, Ore. -- The Grande Ronde rocks, and so does 88-year-old boatman Martin Litton as his dory plunges through waves on the remote river where three Northwest states come together.

Litton is a patriarch of America's conservation movement. He looks the role with flowing white beard and piercing blue eyes.

Patriarchs are rarely gentle souls. Litton is uncompromising even in his chosen means of travel. He has splintered dories in Crystal Rapids of the Colorado River, and still pilots his 1951-vintage Cessna 195 to land-use battlefronts in the West.

Litton was instrumental in the campaign -- with its newspaper ads headlined "Would You Flood the Sistine Chapel so Tourists Could Get Closer to the Ceiling?" -- that stopped the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation from plugging the Grand Canyon with two high dams.

Later, Litton pioneered running the Colorado River -- and Idaho's Snake and Salmon rivers -- using dories instead of rubber rafts.

At age 87 last year, Litton took one of his beloved wooden boats through Lava Falls. The Grand Canyon's wildest rapid would have been inundated by one of BuRec's proposed dams.

Litton and his wife, Esther, are now engaged in a final conservation battle.

They're also enjoying a victory lap, running great rivers of the West that still run wild due to campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s.

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The last campaign is to keep the Forest Service from allowing commercial logging in California's Sequoia National Monument, designated by President Clinton in 2000.

"The Forest Service is stupid, but devious," said Litton, over gin-and-tonics after a long day on the river.

He spread out pictures of logging in the 328,000-acre monument, appealing for its transfer to National Park Service management.

Litton mocks such phrases as "hazard trees" and "forest health" used to justify cuts in the Sequoia Monument. The same words, he noted, were heard in the 1950s from an Olympic National Park superintendent. Majestic trees were chain sawed in the rain forest until conservationists forced managers to stop.

Litton has a long memory and a long view of the West.

A half-century ago, he was writing freelance pieces for the Los Angeles Times that blew the whistle on BuRec plans to flood canyons of Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado and Utah.

He was later travel editor for Sunset Magazine, walking out the door in 1968 after discovering that publisher Bill Lane had yanked a piece on the thousands of acres of giant trees left unprotected by newly designated Redwood National Park.

Last week, the Grande Ronde provided a setting and suitable company for one of the Littons' victory laps. Once proposed for damming, it was protected by Congress under the Omnibus Oregon Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1988.

Lonnie Hutson, head of Idaho-based Sundog Expeditions, builds dories and went to work for Litton 24 years ago. Hutson even remembered to bring Litton a bottle of his beloved Sheep Dip Scotch.

Nobody has better emulated the old man's fierce, ornery idealism than Ric Bailey, a river guide who founded the Hells Canyon Preservation Council. Aiming to keep wild the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area -- created to protect North America's deepest canyon -- the council has fought the Forest Service on fronts ranging from roads to timber cuts to motorized-boat use.

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"Hell, being negative is often the only thing we've had to go with," expounded Litton.

Listening to Litton is not unlike taking a swig of Sheep Dip or another single-malt scotch. The taste is never to be forgotten, but not for everyone.

"The Sierra Club has sunk to be another money-raising outfit, another corporation," said Litton, a onetime director of the club.

He has never forgotten -- or forgiven -- board colleagues willing to compromise and allow just one dam in the Grand Canyon, or let Disney build a big resort in California's high Mineral King Valley (now part of Kings Canyon National Park).

As our party devoured Copper River sockeye -- Lonnie Hutson rafts the Alaska river -- Litton launched in on the subject of fish raised in pens.

"Don't eat farmed salmon," he intoned. "You are contributing to the destruction of the world's wild rivers."

Hutson wisely brought along a case of vintages from Idaho's Hells Canyon Winery. Litton will no longer imbibe wine produced in the Napa Valley of his home state.

"Every billionaire has to own his own winery nowadays," he said. "They've done too much damage to the environment."

Nodding liberal heads stilled as Litton took up the Sierra Club's internal war over whether to work toward limiting immigration.

"Immigration is destroying our country," he said. "We were running the Rio Grande in boats and watching people cross the river at will. It is not 'immigration' we are talking about. It is *illegal* immigration. It has become a joke to talk about 'illegals.' Well, get your dictionary and look up the word 'illegal.' It means unlawful."

Our group rowed 41 miles the next-to-last day on the Grande Ronde. Forested mountain terrain gave way to grassy hills and basalt cliffs. Bighorn sheep romped on steep slopes across from camp.

"Ah, the river, where men are men and women are glad of it," said Litton, pouring himself a libation.

Party members focused a telescope at the bighorns' alpha male. They whooped at his endowment: Ewes of the Grand Ronde would appear to have no complaints.

Our final day brought a tiny sign that Litton is slowing down. We inspected The Narrows, a tricky Class IV rapid. After a walking survey,

Litton turned to guide Colby Hawkinson and declared: "Guess we need some beef on this one. Colby, you've got yourself a job."

Hawkinson negotiated The Narrows flawlessly, and nudged the dory into an eddy.

Litton took back at the oars, ready to take on Bridge Rapids downstream.

The dory evokes Litton's last great cause. Its name: the Sequoia.

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