

## **The Sacred and the Profane: An Analysis of the Rhetoric in David Brower's Campaign to Save the Grand Canyon**

Rachel Whitted  
Furman University

---

This study examines David Brower's *New York Times* advertisements in the 1964–68 Grand Canyon controversy. The essay argues that Brower creates a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, using both discursive and nondiscursive rhetorical techniques. Such an examination adds to our understanding of rhetoric in environmental controversies and, more generally, to our knowledge of argument by comparison.

---

The U.S. environmental movement had its humble origins with Henry David Thoreau in the early nineteenth century, but the movement did not assert a social and political influence until the 1950s and 1960s. The activism of this later period set the tone and rhetorical course of present-day concerns about global climate change, water scarcity, oil spills, and loss of animal habitats. Although there are many key figures in this crucial era of the movement, one of the most influential was David Brower. Brower was the executive director of the Sierra Club from 1952 until 1969. In that position he pushed to increase membership by using media such as books, film, advertising, and photography, all of which grabbed the interest of the public, informed people of dangers to the environment, and made the club a nationally recognized organization. One of the most important of the media campaigns Brower created was a series of “battle ads” he published in the *New York Times* between 9 June 1966 and 16 April 1967. The advertisements informed the public about pending legislation that would harm the Grand Canyon and rallied diverse groups to pressure Congress to save the national landmark. The campaign, which blocked the proposed building of Bridge Canyon Dam and Marble Canyon Dam, is still seen as one of the most successful public rhetorical efforts of the early environmental movement (Lyndgaard).

The purpose of my article will be to examine how Brower uses bold headlines, hyperbole, and melodrama in the *New York Times* advertisements to create a dichotomy between the sacredness of nature and the profanity that threatened it. He employs this argument by comparison to educate the American public on the war that Congress had declared against the environment. Brower harnesses the *topos* of comparison and arguments of difference and degree in his rhetoric, using degree to show the difference between “more” and “less” in the advertisements. He makes the argument that the *more* the planet is protected, the *fewer* will be the places of beauty that are destroyed. He also uses difference to show that nature is sacred, as opposed to the impurities in legislators.

Scholars have addressed environmental rhetoric in a number of studies, but the rhetoric in the Grand Canyon advertisements has yet to be examined. There have, however, been studies on important aspects of environmental rhetoric that are relevant to the current study. Steven Schwarze, for example, analyzes “melodrama” as a form of rhetoric he asserts is found in every environmental controversy, though he notes that it is seldom addressed in rhetorical studies. Melodrama has been effective in persuasive campaigns about the environment, according to Schwarze, because its use creates a “sharp distinction between opposing forces, making resolutions difficult to negotiate; it personalizes problems, deflecting attention from systemic issues; it invites simple solutions,

denying the complexity of controversial situations; and finally, it blinds us to the capacity for change among others and failure among ourselves” (241). Jonathan Lange talks about “refusal to compromise” as a rhetorical tactic, a strategy often used by Brower.

Before analyzing in detail Brower’s rhetorical tactics in the advertisements, I will provide some insight into the environmental movement before David Brower’s involvement and set the stage for the Grand Canyon controversy he addressed.

### Context

Prior to the 1950s and 1960s, concern for the environment was not a prominent U.S. social movement. But due in part to David Brower’s use of the media, the environmental movement increased its level of activity and visibility during the period. To understand Brower’s rhetorical efforts, we must first understand the contexts out of which his discourse emerged.

Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson were pioneers in environmentalism in the eastern United States, but John Muir, one of the founders of the Sierra Club, was the most significant influence on the western environmental movement and David Brower. In 1892, John Muir was contacted by Henry Senger about creating an alpine club for mountaineers, and so began the formation of the Sierra Club. From the 1920s through the 1940s, it was simply a recreational social club for people who enjoyed the wilderness, particularly the Sierra Nevada Mountains. There were about three thousand members in the 1930s. In the 1950s the Sierra Club became a national organization. From seven thousand members in 1950, the club grew to seventy-five thousand by 1969 (Lyndgaard).

The beginnings of American environmentalism focused largely on the West. In her study “The American Environmental Movement,” Stacy Silveira explains that this was due to conditions and changes specific to the region: the “spectacular landscapes encountered dramatic changes due to urbanization. By the 1870s, resource exploitation dominated development patterns in the West” (499). Destructive practices such as overgrazing, timber cutting, mining, and speculation in land and water rights threatened the sacredness of nature. To protect the environment, organizations began to form and grow. Groups such as the Sierra Club began to fight against these destructive tendencies. Prior to the 1960s, the movement focused on “the protection or efficient management of [the] natural environment,” while the new movement that arose in the 1960s centered on “the cleanup and control of pollution” (503). During this time people began to feel concerned for the environment more than ever before and the number of published books addressing the issue of protecting the environment increased. Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) are two of the more prominent works of this period. Both books would have a lasting effect on the movement.

Into this milieu appears David Brower. While climbing in the Sierra Nevada Mountains with high school friends, Brower met Hervey Voge, who suggested that Brower join the Sierra Club. Brower also met photographer Ansel Adams while climbing. Brower greatly admired Adams, who would become the inspiration for Brower’s own photography in the future (Brower 29). In 1939 Brower landed a part-time job working for the Sierra Club and began his rise through the ranks. At this time he helped to make the first Sierra Club film, an experience in filmography which would help him later in his life in his attempts to attract and inform the public (64). Brower finally became executive director of the Sierra Club in 1952. From that point on he worked tirelessly for what he believed to be right.

Brower had many successes prior to his Grand Canyon campaign. Most notably, he used writing and photography to prevent Echo Dam from being built in Dinosaur National Park. Brower also appeared in court to testify against the dam—the beginning of his career in politics to fight legis-

lation that would potentially harm the wilderness. This first success led to many more, but failures were just as frequent. Brower's biggest regret was the loss of Glen Canyon. In this "battle" Brower had to compromise, agreeing to allow Glen Canyon Dam to be built in exchange for Congress's removal of two different dams in Echo Park and Split Mountain from legislative consideration.

In Brower's words, "Upstream and unmarred was the exquisite beauty of Glen Canyon. Most of it was destroyed early in 1963. . . . The dams the bureau [the Bureau of Reclamation] plans to build in Marble Gorge and at Bridge Canyon, within the Grand Canyon proper, would destroy not only the living river but also the unique life forms that through the ages have come to depend upon the river's life" (354). In August 1963 Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall proposed a bill that would create two more dams at Marble Canyon and Bridge Canyon to create more water for the arid West. These dams would "destroy the national treasure of more importance than local and perhaps temporary water needs" ("More Dams Threaten the Grand Canyon"). The controversies surrounding these dams were volatile and raised vital questions: Is the power of dams marketable? Could it be produced more cheaply by steam plants? Do such dams make more water available or just cause more water to be lost by evaporation? Would they become obsolete? Would the dams destroy scenery? Despite these concerns, Morris Udall, Secretary Stewart Udall's brother, was determined to protect these plans and sought to refute the environmentalists' position. In his speech "What's This about Flooding Out the Grand Canyon?" addressed to the House of Representatives on September 1965, he attempted to defend the dam projects.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the publishing of the "battle ads," conservationists tried to fight against the legislation and Morris Udall's remarks in many ways.<sup>2</sup> However, the bill continued to progress in Congress. As a last-ditch effort, David Brower decided to put full-page advertisements into the *New York Times* to rally the public against Congress's plans.

All the lessons Brower had learned throughout his life, all his experience in fighting for the environment, had led up to this moment: this controversy would call his name and ask him to take the lead in making a stand on this issue. His skills and experiences went into the advertisements that successfully saved the Grand Canyon from these two dams.

### **Brower's Environmental Rhetoric**

After seeing the failure of others' attempts to address this issue, Brower finally decided to take matters into his own hands; he began his campaign to save the Grand Canyon with the publishing of the five advertisements. These advertisements successfully gained national attention and were instrumental in halting Congress's attempt to proceed with the dams. But the beginning of the campaign was anything but promising. Brower went to the advertising firm of Freeman, Mander & Gossage for help. In an interview with the author, Jerry Mander related that Brower "came in the office and he brought in his own text that he wanted us to design and put into an ad, and we said it wasn't really good enough, so I wrote a different version and he argued with us that his was really good." In the end, each advertisement except the first was actually written by Jerry Mander, but Brower was involved in the process from beginning to end.

Although each advertisement is unique, they share similarities. According to Mander, their overall strategy was "to win the argument over a specific issue by honest merits—in other words, saying that this is a really stupid thing to do that will really destroy something valuable for nature and ourselves." Each advertisement has a bold, attention-grabbing headline, attracting readers' interest right from the start, making them want to read on. They are concerned about the sacredness of nature just from the headline, enticed to discover what the advertisement has to say about the profane legislators who would do such a horrendous act. As Howard Gossage has argued, "Advertising is not really worth running unless it gets talked about and the reader can do some-

thing about it” (qtd. in Sierra Club). Once the reader’s attention is captured, advertisers can begin to address the information they want to convey.

Next, each advertisement consists of a numbered list outlining the several different points that Brower wanted to address. The points make it easy for the reader to skim the piece and still understand the issues. This format is also easier and more comfortable to read than chunks of text. Each advertisement includes pictures and graphics to describe the situation and to retain the reader’s attention. Brower and Mander use these to emphasize their argument. Finally, and most effectively, most of the advertisements contain coupons preaddressed to congressmen; people could easily clip these out and mail them, making it simple and convenient to express their views to Congress.

The first two advertisements, published on 9 June 1966, were split-run in the *New York Times*. One edition of the newspaper ran Brower’s public letter to Secretary Udall, while the other edition ran the advertisement “Now Only You Can Save Grand Canyon from Being Flooded . . . for Profit” written by Jerry Mander. The pictures displayed in both advertisements are the same, showing water being backed up in the Grand Canyon. The sarcastic caption reads: “The Grand Canyon: How man plans to improve it.” Mander uses this to make a remark about the legislation and criticize Congress’s idea of “improvement” to an already sacred landmark. This graphic amply emphasizes the point being made in the text.

In Brower’s letter to Stewart Udall, he attacks the Secretary of Interior openly. He begins with melodrama: “If Congress lets your Reclamation Bureau ruin Grand Canyon with two dams, can any national park be safe?” The implication is that if the Grand Canyon is lost to dams, surely other valuable areas will be susceptible to destruction as well. He continues by addressing how pointless the dams would be and how engineers should be put to work on “something better.” Brower depicts throughout his letter how sacred and wonderful the Grand Canyon is, and how it is “enough” in itself, claiming that “improvements” are unnecessary and would ultimately hinder the “living river.” Brower also invokes a respectable and honored ally, quoting Theodore Roosevelt’s disagreement with dams to persuade the public and Secretary Udall that they are undesirable.

The second advertisement, “Now Only You Can Save Grand Canyon from Being Flooded . . . for Profit,” is very aggressive and straightforward, outlining the issues and then calling the public to action. The headline clearly implies that Congress is trying to dam the Grand Canyon for profit, making congressmen seem evil and greedy. It concludes, “This time it’s the Grand Canyon. *Grand Canyon.*” Repeating “Grand Canyon” in italics is an effective rhetorical device, making the reader’s choice of whether or not to respond to the advertisement seem obvious.

The third advertisement, published on 25 July 1966, begins with an eye-catching picture of one of the most beautiful sites in the Grand Canyon. Positioned next to it is a model of the Statue of Liberty to demonstrate how much of that beautiful site would be submerged underwater if congressional legislation is allowed to pass. The caption gives a final kick by revealing that later that same beautiful site will be covered in mud. Mander and Brower then list some of the United States’ greatest national parks, attacking Secretary Udall by asking, “How Can You Guarantee These, Mr. Udall, If Grand Canyon Is Dammed For Profit?” This is a bold question, and the risk of asking it shows the importance and urgency of the issue. The advertisement as a whole gives a great overview of the entire controversy but still effectively uses melodrama to enlist readers in the cause and inspire them with the need speak out against the Bureau of Reclamation, the IRS and, most important, Secretary Udall.

Like the others, the fourth advertisement, published on 13 March 1967, grabs the reader’s attention and concern with its headline: “Grand Canyon National Monument Is Hereby Abolished.” The remainder of the advertisement is split into four parts under the subheadings “Goliath and the Philistines,” “Cash Registers,” “Tourists in Power Boats,” and “Mentality.” Organizing the advertisement in this manner makes the text more visually pleasing. The first section describes Brower’s

sense of environmentalists as “David winning against Goliath” and his belief that Congress will back down if conservationists keep fighting. The reference to environmentalists as biblical figures lends a righteousness and solemnity to the cause, placing conservationist advocacy on a sacred level. The second part of the advertisement then juxtaposes this biblical reference with the greed of man by charging that the dams are going to be used as “cash registers.” The profanity of the legislation is brought to light in the implication that everyone supporting dams is doing so for selfish reasons. Juxtaposing these two images—the sacred and the profane—strengthens the argument. Mander’s advertisement goes on to explain why the legislation would not benefit anyone except corporations and selfish government officials. The third section outlines Congress’s arguments in favor of the dams. Here Mander argues by comparison to show how ridiculous the situation is: “And to express their ‘willingness to compromise,’ some of the dam builders have lately suggested just one dam in Grand Canyon instead of two. Like one bullet in the heart instead of two.” The final section explains that the battle is not over for the Grand Canyon; the public still needs to do its part by writing letters and protesting to save the great national monument. The rhetoric in this advertisement is overwhelmingly powerful. This piece in particular is so direct and aggressive in its tactics that it really makes the reader understand the great offense it is that Congress would propose ruining something so beautiful.

The final advertisement uses visual means to emphasize the accusation it makes in the beginning of the advertisement; the picture reinforces and reinscribes the words. A long line from the bottom of the page winding up to the top shows the development of the Earth. At the very end of the line is depicted the creation of the first human being, showing the small amount of time humans have existed compared to the age of the Earth. In an interview Jerry Mander noted that the goal was to “awake[n] a sense of human beings in the natural world.” Mander and Brower use this picture to emphasize how sacred nature is and how humans should respect it. Then Mander proceeds, “It seems to us hasty, therefore, during this blip of time, for Man to think of directing his fascinating new tools toward altering irrevocably the forces which made him.” Using this argument Mander is able to make mankind seem ungrateful to nature. In this advertisement as in the others, graphics and text work together to emphasize the dichotomy between natural beauty and man-made destruction.

Mander goes on to state five points defending preservation. The first addresses the Grand Canyon controversy in particular. He explains how the dams would not provide anyone with water and how they are simply meant as “cash registers.” He describes also how over time they will ruin the scenic beauty of the canyon. He uses the remaining four points to detail other important pieces of wilderness that the government and corporations have decided to destroy to show how the wilderness is constantly under attack.

The headline of this final advertisement, which was published on 16 April 1967, is bold and sarcastic: “Should We Flood the Sistine Chapel?” This is in response to the argument in favor of the dams that they would allow tourists a higher vantage point closer to the cliffs. The headline ridicules this by comparing it to “flooding the Sistine Chapel so tourists can be closer to the ceiling.” The use of hyperbole to exaggerate the situation also works as a melodramatic strategy. Once again Mander and Brower compare saving the Grand Canyon to saving something holy and righteous: the Sistine Chapel. The advertisement closes with a call to action, asking the American public to consider generations beyond their own and save the wilderness.

### **Responses to the Text**

The response to these advertisements was phenomenal and worked exactly to David Brower’s liking. Across the country Americans sent in the coupons from the advertisements. Thanks to the resulting amount of mail legislators received, Brower was able to force Congress to reevaluate the

legislation and finally to halt the dam-building plans entirely. As Jerry Mander said years later, “Stewart Udall had backed the idea of the dams and made an announcement saying the administration was going to withdraw their support. They had never gotten that many responses on anything in the Department of the Interior.”

There was, however, one negative and unforeseen repercussion to the advertisements. The day after the 9 June advertisement, the IRS sent Brower a hand-delivered letter revoking the Sierra Club’s tax-free status as a nonlobbying, nonprofit organization. (A club can be tax deductible so long as it does not participate in advocacy to change legislation.) The move backfired, however, as newspapers all across the country wrote articles about this and began to aid the Sierra Club in its endeavor.

### Conclusions

In an influential article, S. Michael Halloran and Gregory Clark argue that the ideals and ideas that bind communities together are more often *displayed* than *argued* to a witnessing public. They assert that landscapes in particular function rhetorically in this way, enabling citizens to participate in a kind of civic religion. When David Brower took drastic measures to bring to light the profanity that Congress was pressing on the sacredness of the environment, the landscape of the Grand Canyon functioned much as Halloran and Clark describe. One of the most effective rhetorical strategies in these advertisements was the melodrama used to show the sacredness of nature and its importance to the American people. Brower’s use of hyperbole also helped Americans realize the significance of the issue and how pressing was the need to communicate their beliefs to their representatives.

This study, then, extends Halloran and Clark’s analysis by showing how comparative argument adds to the rhetoric of display and expands on ancient theories of invention by revealing how discursive and nondiscursive forms of argument can enhance arguments of difference and degree. Overall, the study shows how important these advertisements were to the development of the environmental movement. Before them, the movement had not been aggressive, but these advertisements heralded a much more forceful profile, kick-starting the modern environmental movement.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In his speech Morris Udall uses his own skewed reasoning to defend the dams. He counters the evaporation loss claim by arguing that the amount of water after evaporation would still be sufficient. He skirts entirely the issues of why hydroelectric power is necessary and the life expectancy of the dam. He also downplays the effect the dams would have on the scenery by arguing that the heightened river would allow people in boats to be closer to the cliffs, thereby “providing access to remote areas, now totally beyond the view of ordinary visitors.”

<sup>2</sup> During the Glen Canyon case, John Wesley Powell had mentioned his views of the Colorado River briefly. Eliot Porter had also written a chapter in one of his books about “The Living Canyon.” The Sierra Club decided to write a book about the controversy to inform the public about what had happened at Glen Canyon and what would happen if dams at Marble Canyon and Bridge Canyon were allowed. *Time and the River Flowing* was written as part of the Sierra Club Exhibit Format Series. It was too late to save Glen Canyon, but it helped show the public the beauty and timelessness of the Grand Canyon. In its support of the dams, the Department of Interior had a film made called *Clear Water on the Colorado*, portraying the beauty and clear water that would come from the dams. Conservationists were able to refute this film by proving that the waters at Glen Canyon were still muddy.

## Works Cited

- Brower, David. *For Earth's Sake: The Life and Times of David Brower*. Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1990. Print.
- Halloran, S. Michael, and Gregory Clark. "National Park Landscapes and the Rhetorical Display of Civic Religion." *Rhetorics of Display*. Ed. Lawrence J. Prelli. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2006. 141–56. Print.
- Lange, Jonathan I. "Refusal to Compromise: The Case of Earth First!" *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (Fall 1990): 473–94. Print.
- Lyndgaard, Kyhl. "Sierra Club." *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*. Ed. J. Baird Callicott and Robert Frodeman. Vol. 2. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2009. 243-45. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 28 June 2013.
- Mander, Jerry. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2012.
- "More Dams Threaten the Grand Canyon." *Hartford Courant* 25 Nov. 1963, 10. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 5 Nov. 2012.
- Schwarze, Steven. "Environmental Melodrama." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92.3 (2006): 239–61. Print.
- Sierra Club. "Grand Canyon Battle Ads." Web. 15 Nov. 2012.
- Silveira, Stacy J. "The American Environmental Movement: Surviving through Diversity." *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review* 28.2 (2004): 497–532. Print.
- Udall, Morris. "What's This about Flooding Out the Grand Canyon?" 15 Sept. 1965. House of Representatives, Washington, DC. University of Arizona Library. Web. 15 Nov. 2012.