River Runners For Wilderness Council Member Tom Martin put the following presentation together on Colorado River Management in Grand Canyon National Park from 1916 to 1956.
It is based on a paper he presented November 5, 2016, at the Grand Canyon Historical Society History Symposium.
Martin began with a simple question... Why go down a dead end road in East LA?
Past this fix-er up-er
Because the Grand Canyon National Park archives are there...
National Archives
Riverside, California
The information he found in the National Archives and at the Museum Collection at Grand Canyon National Park is the basis for what river historian Otis Marston called...
...Cruise Control.
Inspecting the Foundations of Grand Canyon National Park
Colorado River Management 1916 to 1956
A simple graphic showing how the NPS saw the river from 1916 to the 1970’s....
And here is how river runners saw the adventure:

*I know I have gotten more out of this trip by being alone than if a party was along as I have more time, especially at night, to listen and look and think and wonder about the natural wonders, rather than listen to talk of war politics and football scores.*

Buzz Holmstrom below Lava Cliff Rapid, November 21, 1937
The imbalance in access to the river we see today was put into place by 1956. Let’s look at the busiest month in 2016...
June 2016

119 commercial trips with 2,830 passengers

44 do-it-yourself trips with 530 passengers
Why is so much access going to the river’s commercial concessionaires? Well, the foundations for this mismanagement happened between 1916 and 1956!

Back in 1916, what was going down on the river?
27 People had made the run from Lee’s to Pearce by 1916
One man would remove the NPS from the river... but only after there was a river tragedy.
Miner Tillotson Superintendent from 1927 through 1938
The First of what would eventually become the NPS River Unit included Fred Johnson, Glen Sturdevant and James Brooks.

Tragically, on February 20, 1929 Sturdevant and Johnson drowned in low water Horn Creek.
The three men went into low-water Horn Creek in a 12 foot long canvas boat like this one...
After their death, Tillotson banned all NPS employees from making any river cruise in the Park.

Only two NPS employees would participate on two river trips between 1930 and 1955.

Tillotson would leave GRCA and become Regional Director. The NPS would not return to the river until his death in 1955.
While Tillotson kept the NPS off the river, other river folks kept coming. The first folks to get denied access to the river in the Park were this group...
It was the French Trio... Tillotson wrote de Colmont on July 9, 1937 that the NPS required a $10,000 bond (worth $164,000 today) for the rescue he was sure would be needed...

The trio ran from Green River, WY, to Lee’s Ferry in foldboats.
Other river runners did not ask the NPS for permission, like solo boater Buzz Holmstrom
Holmstrom passes Cal-Tech 1937
Just after Holmstrom’s run, Tillotson’s good friend, Zion National Park Superintendent Preston Partraw, wrote to Tilly the following...
Zion National Park, Utah
February 23, 1938

Superintendent Tillotson
Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona

I see Holmstrom's trip down the Colorado made the Saturday evening post stop. Better plan on the checking station on the river now; to check them as they go by, if they get that far. Stop. The next is for someone to try the trip in an oil drum.

Superintendent P.P. Patraw

Telephoned to Supt at 9:45 A.M.
It wasn’t an oil drum, but a rubber raft that showed up next...
On Dr. Elzada Clover’s request, Norm Nevills asked for permission to navigate through the Park on April 27, 1938.

Superintendent Tillotson wrote while “a formal permit... is not required by regulations, ... we naturally do all in our power to discourage such trips.”

Tillotson to Nevills May 3, 1938
Alexander “Zee” Grant made the run in a folboat in 1941, with Norm Nevills
Then these two folks did a trip, and the NPS came unglued...
Two Shoot Rapids, Saved

Caked with slit, battered and bruised, a Los Angeles woman and her companion were rescued from the Colorado River yesterday after an 80-mile downstream expeditionary voyage.

They were Mrs. Georgia White, 35, and Harry Aleson, 42, of Boulder City, veteran river boatman.

A National Park service boat took them from the waters just above Lake Mead.

Most of the eight-day trip was spent clinging to a one-man rubber life raft, after their original barge, made of driftwood, sank when they were less than two days out, they said.

Undaunted by being buffeted against heavy boulders by the rapids, Mrs. White and Aleson said at Boulder City they would "try it again next year—but with a better raft."

RESCUED—Mrs. Georgia White and Harry Aleson, who were taken from Colorado River after eight-day, 80-mile downstream trip that included being buffeted against rocks by rapids after their original barge broke and they clung to rubber life raft. —International News photo.
Region 3 Director Tillotson noted he had “proposed a rule which would prohibit people from running the rapids of the Grand Canyon unless they were able to show proper qualification.”

July 5, 1946
Acting NPS Director Hillory Tolson wrote “That... [Aleson and Georgie] trip... was clearly prohibited... without a permit from the superintendent. Every reasonable effort should be made to discourage hazardous expeditions into Service areas.”

November 18, 1946
NPS Director Drury wrote “we owe it both to ourselves and to the venturesome to assert such control over these attempts as we can legally without impeding undertakings such as those conducted by Norman Nevills.”

September 30, 1947
There it was, the first time in writing... commercial trips are OK, but the “venturesome” were NOT ok...
NPS Director Drury charged Superintendent Harold Bryant with writing a permit application “under which such a permit would be issued.”

September 30, 1947
October 9, 1947

Bryant offered Nevills a river concession and wrote “some of the “wild” expeditions through the Canyon could be partially stopped by strict regulations demanding a permit and requirements as to the equipment and as to experienced personnel.” Bryant sent Nevills a permit application to review.
Nevills agreed to a concession and wrote “by enacting certain very stringent regulations you will keep out poorly equipped and inexperienced white water men.” Norm noted boatman should have “at least 1,000 miles of boating on fairly rough water” and “any form of rubber life raft or boat is not safe.”
On April 22, 1947, the first permit went to Norm Nevills...
The first Permit Application draft (ten questions) was reviewed by NPS Associate Director Demaray, who noted it was designed to “eliminate the daredevil expeditions.”

March 31, 1948
Ed Hudson and Norm Nevills get permits in 1948.

Nevills, Hudson and Don Harris were issued permits in 1949.
Then the river was closed to all river traffic. It happened after Norm Nevills tragically died in a plane crash. River historian Otis Marston quoted Superintendent Bryant as saying the following just after Norm’s passing:
“Here Nevills is dead, and the only person that seems to be in line to run commercial trips is this Harry Aleson and obviously his crazy ideas... he’s dangerous. So I have decided to stop all boating.”

Superintendent Bryant
November 1949
At a dinner party in Berkeley after closing the river, the Superintendent was reminded the river was navigable and he could not legally close it. The river was re-opened...
Three men in the DEACON’S DILEMMA ran without a permit in 1949. The result was the NPS said any do-it-yourself trip that attempted a river cruise without a permit, regardless of skill, supply or craft used, would be considered illegal. Every effort would be made to remove this type of “illegal” trip from the river. It mattered not if the occupants were doing just fine.
And they just kept coming...
so much so that two years later,
Superintendent Bryant would write...
"The river is now a regular highway, and it’s hard to take care of everybody!"

Bryant, October 15, 1951
In the winter of 1952-1953, a new list of fifteen permit application questions was drafted...
Bolte and Eaton take the first motorized bridge pontoon through, one of four trips without a permit in 1954. Four other trips had a permit...
In April of 1955, Beer and Daggett swim the river without a permit. They proved the importance of good lifejackets and that a boat was not even needed...
And then the heavies marched in. Senior management changed at the Park, including the creation of a new position, Inner Canyon Ranger. There was a new Chief Ranger and Superintendent as well...
1955-1956
John McLaughlin, Dan Davis and Lynn Coffin
John McLaughlin served as Assistant Director of Region Two from 1950 to 1955, which included Dinosaur National Park. McLaughlin was aware of how Dinosaur had “solved” their “means of controlling this type of use.” The Dinosaur river permit system “does not encourage boating on these rivers without the services of a competent guide.”
The Boating Permit RULES AND REGULATIONS were completely revised using Dinosaur’s boating requirements. Grand Canyon was “going to put great stock in it.”
Otis Marston cautioned about following the Dinosaur model and did “not think experience in the boatman is adequate insurance against risk of life.” He cautioned about attempting “to lay down the law too strictly” and noted it was better if the NPS took a stance of wanting to help river runners.
But commercial operator Georgie White commented that if the smallest rubber raft was a ten man it would “cut out a good many fly by nights and marginal outfits.” None of the park’s “steady customers” used anything smaller anyway.
And the Park made its choice...
RULES AND REGULATIONS noted:

watercraft not allowed - foldboats, canoes, and kayaks

watercraft allowed - 10-man rafts or larger

one-boat trips were eliminated
Besides the Three pages of RULES AND REGULATIONS, there were major changes in the APPLICATION FOR BOATING PERMIT...
The APPLICATION FOR BOATING PERMIT asked for “dates for experience through Grand Canyon.” Unlike in the past, if the applicant could not list experience through Grand Canyon, the APPLICATION was NOT approved.
The 1956 regulations barred all do-it-yourself users without “prior experience.”
At the close of 1956, visitation to the Park topped the one million mark for the first time. Less than 500 people had made the transit from Lee’s Ferry to Lake Mead.
Commercial use exploded in the next fourteen years while do-it-yourself use was kept in check.

In 1970, an alarmed NPS froze all river use at roughly 10,000 commercial passengers and crew, and about 300 do-it-yourself river runners.

From four commercial operators in 1956, there were twenty four operators in 1970.
The NPS returned to the river with their own boat in 1968, and by 1973, when the next picture was taken, were well on their way to learning about the river, as Sturdevant, Johnson and Brooks once tried to do so long ago...
Horn Creek Rapid
But the do-it-yourselfers were still out in the cold. Multiple lawsuits in the 1970s and 1990s resulted in an increase in do-it-yourself use levels, while commercial operator use has remained fairly fixed since 1981.
That increased use for the do-it-yourselfers, though absolutely justified, came about by adding more users to an already crowded river...
We don’t yet know what the next 100 years of river running will be like...
...but reallocating use instead of just cramming more river runners into an already overcrowded river must be put into the NPS management toolbox.

The End (of the first 100 years of river management and beginning of the next... www.rrfw.org)