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*Current Grand Canyon Resource Issues:
Briefing Paper Series*

Preserving Natural Quiet

When one thinks of the Grand Canyon, the mind conjures images of panoramic landscapes sculpted out of sandstone by centuries of wind, rain, snow and sun; colorful and awe-inspiring sunrises and sunsets; and, grand expanses of peace and quiet. Unfortunately, such profound natural quiet is becoming scarce at the Grand Canyon. Slowly the ubiquitous noises of our modern society have intruded into the natural quiet of the canyon. These incursions began slowly with the arrival of the train in the 1920s and the popularity of car travel since the 1950s, but these were limited to the developed rim. Today the popularity of scenic air tours over the canyon threatens natural quiet in the very remotest parts of the canyon. In 1987, recognizing the magnitude of the problem, Congress passed the National Parks Overflights Act which directed the National Park Service (NPS) and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to establish rules to restore the "natural quiet and experience to the park." Nonetheless, over 800,000 people took tour flights last year, twice as many flights as in 1987. Today more than two-thirds of the park experiences unacceptable levels of tour aircraft noise and, if the present situation continues, by 2010 less than 10 percent of the park will have natural quiet. In July 1996, the FAA issued proposed rules covering the next 2 years that would increase flight free zones to 87% of the Park, impose a dusk to dawn curfew on flights, and cap the number of flights at current levels. The public comment period on this rule closes on September 30, 1996.

BACKGROUND

What is natural quiet? As defined by the National Park Service (NPS), natural quiet is the natural ambient sound conditions found in an area, including "self-noise," such as hiking boots, creaking packframes, and talking, provided by the visitor himself. The creators of our national park system never dreamed of the need to protect this resource. However, in the case of Grand Canyon, natural quiet was expressly identified by Congress as a resource of concern in the 1975 Grand Canyon National Park Enlargement Act. Since that time, natural quiet has been regularly regarded as a valuable, intrinsic resource equal to plants, animals, water, and air. Today natural quiet is a concern in several parts of the park. For example, rim visitors at overlooks are exposed to the engine and tire sounds of thousands of automobiles. These problems are restricted to the roads along the rims and are addressed in the paper on visitor management. The greatest impact to natural quiet in the remote backcountry sections of the park is from overflying aircraft, particularly scenic air tours.

The visual experience of the Grand Canyon has always been popular; commercial air tours are not new. Air tours began in the 1930s. It's not uncommon for commercial jets to make lazy turns 30,000 feet above the park. But during the

1980s, scenic flights from Tusayan (just outside the southern park boundary), Las Vegas, Nevada and other surrounding towns rapidly increased. Because airspace over national parks is administered by the FAA rather than the NPS, few restrictions existed. Planes and helicopters could fly over any portion of the park, above and below the rim. In the mid-1980s, helicopters were common visitors at Havasu Creek, Deer Creek Falls, Thunder River, and a number of archeological sites deep within the canyon. The midair crash of two tour aircraft over the Canyon in 1986 led to a strong call by the public for restrictions on tour flights. The result was the National Parks Overflights Act of 1987. Sponsored by Senator John McCain of Arizona, the legislation promised to "...provide for the substantial restoration of the natural quiet and experience of the Park..." In 1988, the NPS drafted an Aircraft Management Plan which banned flights below the rims and created "flight-free" zones covering 44% of the Park. New rules, known as SFAR 50-2, went into effect in 1988.

HOW WELL IS IT WORKING?

A 1994 NPS report documenting the effectiveness of the rules concluded that a substantial restoration of natural quiet has not been achieved for large segments of Grand Canyon, that natural quiet is of significant value to visitors, and that a

majority of visitors to the canyon would support specific limitations on air tour overflights. According to the NPS, substantial restoration of natural quiet will be achieved when at least 50percent of the park area experiences natural quiet 75 to 100 percent of the time.

There have been great strides made in quieter helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft but economic hurdles slow the adoption of this technology. The air tour industry points out that complaints have drastically decreased. However, natural quiet advocates charge that the effect of current rules simply exports impacts from the busy rim areas to the remote river and backcountry sections of the canyon. They point out that the NPS is charged with protecting the natural quiet resource, not merely minimizing visitor complaints.

NPS report included recommendations for the following changes in the overflight rules:

- closing the Dragon Corridor that overflies popular Hermit Basin backcountry routes;
- enlarging the flight-free areas of the park to include Marble Canyon;
- converting the entire Grand Canyon airspace to the least noisy tour aircraft;
- establishing flight-free seasons or times of day;

CURRENT TOUR FLIGHT CORRIDORS

Where you're likely to see and hear a lot of traffic....
(minimum tour altitudes are usually 7,500 ft.)

DRAGON- *The busiest of corridors passes over Hermit's Rest on the South Rim and crosses the river near Crystal Rapid.*

ZUNI- *Lies north-south beginning just west of Desert View on the South Rim and crossing the river over Hance and Unkar Rapids.*

FOSSIL- *As the name implies this corridor crosses the river over Fossil Canyon and the Middle Granite Gorge.*

MARBLE CANYON- *From Lees Ferry to House Rock minimum altitude is 5,000 ft., from there to 50 mile, 6,000 ft. With the exception of the actual North Rim areas, all of Unkar, Carbon, Kwagunt and Nankoweap basins and the Little Colorado River Confluence have 7500 ft. floors.*

WESTERN CANYON- *Downstream of Havasu on the south side and on both sides below Lava Falls, minimum altitude is 6,500 ft. Downstream of Diamond Creek it's only 6,000 ft.*

- properly defining the North Rim's elevation so that tour aircraft flying above the rim" are actually flying above the North Rim elevation.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

In late July the FAA issued a proposed two-year rule for overflights of Grand Canyon. It would increase flight free zones to include 87% of the Park, impose a curfew on flights from one hour before sunset to one hour after sunrise, and cap the total number of flights at current levels (approximately 100,000 flights/year). The public comment period on this rule closes on November 14, 1996.

Despite these significant improvements there are several flaws. The increased flight free zones will result in only an 8% increase in the area of the park experiencing natural quiet. Without permanent limits on flights even this gain will eventually be lost as use increases. Finally, there are no firm economic incentives for tour operators to move toward the quietest technology.

You can make your views known. Write the FAA and make the following points:

- 1) Support an immediate and permanent limitation on the number of flights;*
- 2) Endorse firm incentives that will shift all flights to quieter aircraft;*
- 3) Support Flight Free Zones as proposed including two new zones to protect Marble Canyon and Western Grand Canyon;*
- 4) The National Park Service's definition of natural quiet should prevail.*

Submit comments on the proposed rule in triplicate to the address at right by September 30, 1996, or via the internet at: nprmcmts@mail.hq.faa.gov

For more information contact Grand Canyon Trust at the address below or visit the Natural Quiet Site on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.rhinonet.com/quiet>.

Send comments to:

Federal Aviation Administration
Office of the Chief Counsel
Attention: Rules Docket (AGC-200)
Docket No. 28537
800 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20591