



# MULES IN THE GRAND CANYON

(PART IV)

*By Terry Wagner*

**Author's note:** In the three previous installments I have attempted to explain the status of the environmental assessment that is currently underway regarding mules and stock use in the Grand Canyon National Park. I focused on the historical significance of the mules in the canyon and the general management plan with which the NPS is currently undertaking the environmental assessment and tried to show how the mules fit into the tourist spectrum of the Grand Canyon.

The Grand Canyon mules are more than just a tourist attraction; they are part of our American heritage. People have often said that America has no culture. To support this they say that America is a melting pot of people, coming from all races, all countries and all religions. To be sure, we are still a young nation when compared to those countries that developed centuries ago in Europe, Asia and Africa. But, our ancestors all arrived here, wherever they were from, with the idea of building a new place in this world where freedom was to be the human foundation for a new nation.

Building America was done with conviction, sweat and hard work, and it could not have been done without help. Those hardy pioneers had no machinery to help them, so our ancestors looked to mules, horses and oxen to do the work they were not capable of doing with their bare hands. Those animals, the work they performed and the fruit of their labor for man became part of our American heritage. They themselves had famous individuals among them; the Justin Morgan stallion is a case in point.

The Grand Canyon mules are surely part of our great American heritage in the southwest. I have documented their use in the Grand Canyon back 150 years. Now the National Park Service, an agency responsible for preserving our historic foundations, is on an obvious path to destroy mule and stock use in the Grand Canyon. They have made press releases to the contrary, but they don't walk that talk. Without a national advocate for stock use in the Grand Canyon, both commercial and private use, I fear another part of our American heritage will be wiped out forever by organizations, both private and public and by their managers as they press forward with their personal agendas

## THE FIRING SQUAD

Those who most support the mule rides in the Grand Canyon and the use of private livestock in the canyon need to understand that these historical practices are in front of the firing squad. Once the NPS gives the order to "fire," the use of livestock in the Grand Canyon will change forever.

Some might question the timing of this process, as the current General Management Plan is about to be put to sleep. Why not "defer" this process on the mules like so many other park programs that do not hold the historical significance the mules

do. This question has been asked and everyone quotes the General Management Plan. There has been no outward sign of environmental organizations working behind the scenes to bring about the microscope being placed on stock use in the canyon. However, those elements are certainly looking at the canyon mules and some would like to see them gone.

Jim McCarthy, the Flagstaff City Planning and Zoning Commissioner and Sierra Club member, was quoted in the Flagstaff *Arizona Daily Sun*, saying, "The Park Service should consider removing the mules

from the canyon entirely." Although I am sure Mr. McCarthy does not speak for the entire membership of the Sierra Club, it most likely is the opinion of many environmentalists.

A recent article that appeared in the *Arizona Republic* newspaper, on the mules in the Grand Canyon, "On Shaky Ground" (September 27, 2009), written by John Faherty starts out: "Their hooves hit the ground like a pickax. The hardened earth crumbles. The paths erode more quickly." I have to take exception to this description. Mr. Faherty is obviously promoting the

view that the mules are responsible for the poor condition of the trails in the Grand Canyon. In reality, everything and everybody who touches the trails has some impact on them. This trail impact has been going on since the very first ancient Native American set foot in the canyon. The entire canyon was formed from day one by erosion.



In a previous article I showed a photo graciously provided by the NPS. The condition of that section of the trail showed an extreme lack of maintenance. The above photo is repeated here for purposes of illustration. In the same breath above, Faherty quotes the NPS saying that the current rebuilding of the South Kaibab Trail is “the trail’s first significant improvement in nearly 80 years.” Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to point out that the NPS has been running the Grand Canyon National Park since 1919. That means the NPS hasn’t done any meaningful maintenance on the South Kaibab Trail since ten years after they became responsible for it. Where has Congressional Oversight been in this matter? After all, Congress is responsible for our National Parks. Yet, the photo mentioned above was taken as part of a major rebuilding of part of the South Kaibab Trail in 2004. **There is a real credibility gap here!**

All of a sudden, the mules are the major cause of all the trail problems. Eighty years of neglected maintenance sounds more like the culprit to me, not to mention millions of hikers who have gone up and down the trail, and eighty years of erosion caused by snow, hail, rain, and spring thaws, and the fact that some parts of the trail have as much as a 22% down-grade. Such grades are the fast lane for natural erosion, without the help of man or beast.

I have ridden more than just a few miles on mules, as I am sure a lot of this publication’s subscribers have. I have yet to see a

mule’s hoof strike the ground hard enough to crumble the earth, even on a mule’s best day and neither has Mr. Faherty. But this lack of responsible rhetoric adds fuel to the fire of those who want to see the mules removed from the Grand Canyon. Faherty goes on to mention all of the other issues, such as lack of maintenance funds that add to the woes of the canyons trails. Those woes are real to be sure.

Mr. Faherty also quotes Rachel Stanton, an NPS employee and environmental protection specialist who is doing the administrative work on the current environmental assessment. Reviewing public comments and “erosion studies” of the trails, Stanton flatly states, “There will be changes.” If the environmental assessment is still in progress, how can Stanton come to the conclusion that “there will be changes”? The assessment is supposed to be an impartial investigation that looks at public opinion, and scientific findings. The first proposals of the assessment are at least two months away as this is written and we have been told that changes are coming.

This can only lead to the conclusion that “the changes” were preconceived before the onset of the NEPA process and the entire proceeding is nothing more than eye-wash dumped in the face of the public. And, in the middle of all this, Faherty has Steve Martin, the director of the park, Barclay Trimble, his assistant director and Tim Jarrell, chief of the parks facilities management division, bowing before the alter of the almighty hiker. Faherty quotes the NPS,

“Hikers are good for the trail, as they compact the soil.”

## NO OPTIONS

Make no mistake about it; the land management agencies in the U.S., National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service, are sued on a regular basis by environmental groups of all kinds. A big share of the budgets of these land agencies goes toward defending these agencies in various Federal District Courts. Because of this, a certain amount of the policies followed by these agencies are the result of court decisions. Also impacting these agencies is the intent of Congress. The National Park Service was created when Congress passed the 1916 Organic Act. Congress has several times reemphasized the intent of the above act. Portions of section 1.4 of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of the NPS Management Policies and is quoted below:

*The “fundamental purpose of the national park system, established by the Organic Act and reaffirmed by the General Authorities Act, (an act of Congress) as amended, begins with a mandate to conserve park resources and values. This mandate...applies all the time, with respect to all park resources and values, even when there is no risk that any park resources or values may be impaired...*

*Continued on page 34*



*The laws to give the service the management discretion to allow impacts to park resources and values when necessary and appropriate to fulfill the purpose of a park, so long as the impact does not constitute impairment of the affected resources and values.*

*An impact to any park resource or value may constitute an impairment. An impact would be more likely to constitute impairment to the extent that it affects a resource or value whose conservation is:*

*Necessary to fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or proclamation of the park;*

*Key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park or to opportunities for the enjoyment of the park; or Identified as a goal in the park's general management plan or other relevant NPS planning documents.*

#### 1.4.7 Decision-making Requirements to avoid Impairments

*Before approving a proposed action that could lead to impairment of park resources and values, an NPS decision maker must consider impacts of the proposed action and determine in writing, that the activity will not lead to an impairment of the park resources and values. If there would be an impairment, the action may not be approved.*

Cutting to the bottom line of these policy statements, it would appear that any impact (use) that constitutes an impairment would not be allowed. Is this the reason for the environmental assessment currently underway?

## TOO OFTEN REPEATED

Tawn Mangum whose family takes almost a hundred riders a day into the North Rim country, was quoted in the *Arizona Daily Sun*, saying, "The mules built the trails. We're kind enough to let the hikers use them and now they want to kick us off the trails."



*Mules on Bright Angel Trail.  
photo by Howard Schwatz 4-29-09.*

There may be some truth in what Tawn says. In the past, in more than one location, equestrian groups and organizations have been instrumental in the building and maintenance of public trails only to find themselves banned from using those very trails. In the Grand Canyon, the mules are the only logical means of transportation in maintaining the trails, and the cross canyon corridor trails are the means by which users of the Arizona Trail can cross the canyon on their way to the Utah border. How this would be resolved has not been made known to the public. Logic would dictate that a permit system would remain in place

for these trail users, as Bill Allen has said that private stock use is not an impact on the canyon trails.

## FREE ENTERPRISE

The mule concessions on both the North and South Rims are private enterprises. Granted they do operate under a contractual agreement with the NPS but they are still privately owned. As such, public opinion may be on the side of the mules and private stock use in the canyon. However, these concessioners have not made a general appeal for the public to support them in any way with the fate of the commercial mule use in the canyon. The contract for the South Rim mule concession comes up for review and renewal sometime in the next two years. If Xanterra decided to get out of the mule business, the concession would be put out to bid or perhaps closed forever.

In light of the private enterprise status of the mule concessions, individuals may only have the private use of livestock in the canyon to be concerned about. If commercial livestock concessions are removed, private stock use in the canyon must be left unchanged. All efforts to retain private stock use in the Grand Canyon must be brought to bear on the NPS.

## OPTIONS

The NPS is considering several alternatives in the mule use issue. The one word that is threaded throughout the issue is "sustainable" use. There is a certain irony in all that has transpired so far. The NPS has stated it wants to continue mule use in



*Mule riders on a cliff.*

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**Author, PaPa Tyre and the Gang**

the canyon. Along these lines, they have backed themselves into a corner, as they need the mules for maintenance and administrative chores. As Faherty points out in his article, in not so many words, everything heavy goes in and out of the canyon is on a mule's back.

The NPS is considering moving the commercial and private stock use to the South Kaibab trail, or to the Hermits Trail, west of the Grand Canyon Village. The Hermits



*Unidentified mule riders in the Grand Canyon.*

Trail is a seven mile round trip to an area known as Dripping Springs and descends less than 1700 feet into the canyon and is considered by some as not the most scenic route in the canyon.

Another option the NPS has available is to limit the stock use in the canyon to its own needs, such as trail maintenance, hauling supplies to Bright Angel campground, etc. Limiting the public mule rides to trails along the rim has been suggested. People want to ride the mules into the canyon, not along some token trail through the Juniper trees and rocks that line the flat edge of the Grand Canyon. Casey Murph, who ran the mule concession on the South Rim, told me that such a ride existed at one time, and it was not "sustainable" as it was almost impossible to sell tickets for the ride. However, this would most certainly allow the mule rides to die their own, slow, death.

## REAL OPINIONS

During the course of writing these articles on the mules in the Grand Canyon, I have read in excess of over 200 articles on the mules in the canyon. Those authoring these articles include reporters, magazine writers, equestrians, hikers, conservationists and environmentalists. The overwhelming number of these folks favors the mules remaining in the Grand Canyon. Certainly there were detractors who want

everything but the flowing Colorado River removed from the canyon, but they are certainly in the minority when it comes to the articles I have read. These articles were strictly picked at random on the Internet and made for very interesting reading. One author, who was obviously from the environmentalist community, made it clear that he did not appreciate the mule leavings on the trail, but at the same time was willing to accept it as the mules were such an historic symbol of the canyon. Another complained about the close timing of three mule trains he encountered on the North Rim, but felt he could live with it if the timing of the mule trains into the canyon were better managed. One rather interesting fellow gave forth the concern that he might catch tetanus by falling in mule poop on the trail. I really think that not engaging in taste testing would be a good preventative for this issue.

Scores of other folks commented about how the mule ride into the Grand Canyon was the biggest memory of their trip to the Grand Canyon. Numerous others made it plain that they could never hike to the bottom of the canyon but could, did, and would take again, a mule ride to the bottom of the canyon. One website that I will note here is the National Parks Traveler site. It is published on the web by the National Parks Advocate Inc. ([www.nationalparkstraveler.com](http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com)) it is a site dedicated to publishing National Park issues on a daily basis. Following their story on the mules and the NPS scoping meetings on the mules, nineteen blogs were posted and they were overwhelmingly in favor of the mules remaining in the canyon. There were a few who agreed with reviewing safety issues in the canyon and there were a large number of people who expressed negative concerns, but felt that their issues with the mules could be resolved with better planning of the mule trips into the canyon. A



*Mule train to Phantom Ranch.*



*Mules taking a break on the Bright Angel Trail.*

couple of folks expressed the opinion that the mules use in the canyon would definitely undergo some changes but it was their wish that the mules not be removed from the canyon. Many people expressed the historic symbolism of the Grand Canyon mules and the need to preserve mule use in the canyon. I found this to be pretty much the same no matter where I searched.

## TRANSPARENCY

The current national administration has promised "transparency" in its dealings with the American public. This applies to all of the elected and appointed officials, national department heads, and those within these agencies charged with implementing the "Freedom of Information Act." When *Western Mule Magazine* first announced the possibility of the mules being removed from the Grand Canyon, it was noted that this information was brought out in meetings at the Grand Canyon between members of the NPS and an employee of Xanterra. Casey Murph, who at the time ran the mule concession for Xanterra attended four meetings that took place on June 9, July 16, August 13 and September 17, 2008. Casey said the NPS personnel present at the meetings, with some variations, included Bill Allen, Laura Nelson, and Randy Carol. At those meetings it was announced by NPS personnel that the South Kaibab Trail would be shut down for repairs for two to four years, and that during that period, mules and other stock would not be allowed on the South Kaibab Trail. Following the completion of the repairs on the South Kaibab Trail, the Bright Angel Trail would be rebuilt, and at that time the mules would be removed permanently from the Bright Angel and south Kaibab Trails.

One reader of this publication, David Robart, an Arizona resident, undertook his own effort to gain some insight into the situation. In accordance with current statutes, he submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to the NPS at the Grand Canyon requesting information about the above four meetings. Mr. Robart received what was essentially a denial of his request, stating that it was being denied as no records, or notes were kept of the four meetings. The NPS did not deny the meetings took place, only that no records were kept of what transpired during those meetings and that any personal notes kept by the participants were not subject to a Freedom of Information Act request.

It is inconceivable that four meetings took place between essentially the same members of the NPS and no record, no matter how informal was kept, on a matter as important as removing from the park, the most recognized symbol of the Grand Canyon National Park in the world, the Grand Canyon Mules. It is actions like this that make many people think the NPS is trying to pull a fast one regarding the mules and stock use in the canyon.

### **GET INVOLVED**

I would hope that organizations such as the Back Country Horsemen of America and other groups, and those who advocate

unfettered access to public lands, are watching to make sure the NPS is following the NEPA process to the letter in dealing with the Grand Canyon mules. Neither the NPS nor any other federal land management organization is allowed to skip any part of NEPA. They can't perform steps one and two, then skip three and go to step four. If the NPS doesn't follow the process, it's not Kings ;, it's back to square one.

One situation that plays into the hands of those who would deny stock use to the public is the lack of organization on the part of equestrian organizations and individuals. To be sure, organizations like the Equestrian Trails, Inc. (California), National Trailride Conference (California) and other state, regional and national equestrian organizations are in the trenches when it comes to the denial of livestock use on public lands. However, there are numerous groups that ride public trails, but don't get involved. Many private individuals ride public trails, but don't contribute in any way to trail advocacy. Many others, both individuals and groups, take a wait and see stance. By the time they have stood long enough to see what is taking place it's too

late to do anything about it.

By the time you read this, the first proposals, under the NEPA process, will be published or close to publication. At that time there will be another period for the public to submit comments on the proposals from the NPS. Regardless of your feelings on the mules in the Grand Canyon, please take the time to read the proposals and submit written comments to the NPS. If at all possible, attend what will be further public meetings on the subject once the proposals are published. Talk to the members of the NPS that are in attendance at these meetings. Keep in mind that the majority of these folks are honest, hard working people like the rest of us and are simply doing the job they were hired to do. Most do not have a personal agenda to promote and honestly want to hear what you have to say.

One thing is certain, if the NPS gives the order for the firing squad to shoot, it will be the second famous shot heard round the world.

**GET INVOLVED!!!**

# **LATE BREAKING NEWS**

## **A new mule ride at the Grand Canyon replaces the Plateau Point Ride**

*October 5, 6:28 p.m. - Grand Canyon National Park Examiner - Linda Updike*

**Starting today a new mule ride tour is being offered to guests at the Grand Canyon South Rim. The new Abyss Overlook Mule Ride will replace the Plateau Point Ride. The new ride is along the rim of the canyon and takes three hours. The Plateau Point Ride descended into the canyon along the Bright Angel Trail to Plateau Point and took seven hours. By moving the mule trips to the rim there will be fewer mules along the BA Trail which is always a popular request of canyon hikers.**

**Photos provided by the National Park Service and the Kolb Brothers.**

**The National Park Service's cooperation with provision of photos for this article is not to be considered an endorsement of the contents of this article.**

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