River Flowing From The Sunrise

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Close to the time (roughly A.D. 1300) when the Anasazi abandoned their alcove dwellings and floodplain farms for lands south of the San Juan River, the tribes that would be present at the start of the historic period arrived to take their place. Fortunately, because of written records and a healthy oral tradition, there is a much better understanding of the importance of the river in the lives of these Native American groups: the Utes, Paiutes, and Navajos. All three tribes took a physical, pragmatic stance toward the river, encouraging use of the riparian ecology in a high-desert environment. They also, however, held strong beliefs about its spiritual powers, based upon mythological teachings. What follows is an overview of traditional Native American perspectives that reflects a mundane, yet sacred, relationship between the land and its people.

Let’s begin with a brief sketch of these peoples’ prehistory and early history. The Numic-speaking Paiutes and Utes were the first to arrive on the brown waters of the San Juan. Anthropologists argue about when the ancestors of these people set foot in the Four Corners area. Some believe there were two different migrations of Numic speakers, one around A.D. 1 and the second around A.D. 1150. The latter movement generally coincides with Anasazi abandonment of the San Juan basin, but evidence of turmoil between the two groups is sketchy. Other anthropologists believe the Southern Utes came much later; most agree that by the 1500s, both groups were well established in the region.1

By historic times, the Southern Utes comprised three bands: the eastern-most group was the Muache, who lived in the Denver area; the Capote ranged through the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of Colorado and south to Taos, New Mexico; and the Weeminuche hunted and gathered on lands bounded by the Dolores River in western Colorado, and in Utah, the Colorado River to the north and west, and the San Juan River to the south. All these groups were highly mobile and journeyed far into the Great Basin, throughout the Colorado Plateau, and onto the plains. The Weeminuche Utes dominated southeastern Utah, playing the most critical role along the San Juan River.

The Paiutes shared a cloudy prehistoric past with their linguistic brothers, the Utes. At the time of early white contact, sixteen identifiable bands comprised the Paiute tribe, with the San Juan being the only group to occupy lands south and east of the Colorado River. Perhaps this is why their name has been translated as “people being over on the opposite side” or the “San Juan River people.”2 In southeastern Utah, the San Juan Paiutes lived close to the Weeminuche. While Southern Paiute territory centered in southwestern Utah and Nevada, its most eastern members, the San Juan Paiutes, pushed into Monument Valley on the Utah-Arizona border. So it is not surprising that the historical record tells of groups of these people living at the base of Navajo Mountain, in Monument Valley, at Douglas Mesa, in Allen Canyon to the north, and around the Bears Ears and Elk Ridge, whose canyons drain into the San Juan. Intermarriage between Utes and Paiutes creates even greater confusion in separating the two groups. Southeastern Utah was truly a mixing pot, in every sense of the word.3

The major distinction between the Utes and Paiutes in this area was a cultural, not a linguistic,
one, brought about by the environment and the technology related to it. In white documents and correspondence, the Utes and Paiutes of southeastern Utah are often described simply as Paiutes. From a more scholarly point of view, the Paiutes operated in family groups, and only infrequently, when resources allowed, came together as bands. They hunted and gathered in an austere desert land and had no centralized chieftain, collective religious practices, or common goal (other than survival) to unite them.

The Weeminuche Utes shared many of these characteristics but were generally able, because of a richer environment and access to the horse, to operate in larger, more-cohesive groups. The farther east one traveled, the more the Ute culture took on a Plains Indian look. The Utes in the Lower San Juan area used brush wickiups (characteristic of the Paiute culture) in the summer and elk and deerskin tepees (identified with the Plains Indians) in the winter, suggesting this cultural mix. To the white settlers, there was little or no distinction between Utes and Paiutes on the Lower San Juan. For ease of identification, this book will simply refer to the two groups in this region as Utes.

These peoples’ interaction with the land spoke of deep cultural ties. Though not as well documented as some historic groups, the Utes named places and endowed the land and its creatures with significance. They also had a descriptive classification system that helped locate a spring, canyon, or resource. Thus, names for the San Juan River included Water Canyon, River Flowing from the Sunrise, and Lower River (compared to the Colorado River, known roughly as Cedar Trees and Canyon Runs through It).

Canyons that join the river and places around it had similar names. For example, there were Greasewood or Sagebrush Canyon (Montezuma Canyon), Slick Rock Mound (Comb Ridge), Red Wash (Cottonwood Wash—the water runs red when it rains), Down by the River (Bluff), Two Rocks Canyon (Cow Canyon), Water Runs Every Day through There (Recapture Canyon), and Bitter Root or Many Yucca Mountain (Sleeping Ute Mountain).

The life of a nineteenth-century Ute, before intensive white contact forced drastic changes, was tied closely to the rhythms of nature. The People followed a seasonal pattern of migration that was carefully bound to the plants and animals ready for harvest. Not surprisingly, water and grass played a dominant role. The People selected campsites based upon the availability of springs, streams, and rivers for drinking water, grass for livestock, and firewood and trees for shelter and preferred lower elevations to avoid the deep snows of winter. As the deer moved down from higher elevations in the late fall, the People followed the same pattern,

This Ute petroglyph along the San Juan River was etched during historic times and emphasizes mobility, an essential characteristic of Ute lifestyle. (James M. Aton photo)
descending to valley or canyon floors where shelter and food were available.

This natural cycle was incorporated into the descriptive names for the seasons. For example, fall was called “leaves turning yellow,” winter “heavy snow” or “hard-times month,” spring “snow melting,” and summer “leaves coming out” or “much warmer for growing things.” The three spring months had specific titles: March—“warm days beginning,” April—“green grass appearing,” and May—“mother of the two preceding months.” The People started to move back to the mountains “when the doves sound soft.”

The Utes established their winter camps in locations such as Montezuma Canyon, with its neighboring Cross, Squaw, and Benow Canyons; Dry Valley, Harts Draw, Beef Basin, Westwater and Cottonwood Canyons, Butler Wash, White and Douglas Mesas, and along the San Juan River—especially near Bluff, Recapture Canyon, and Sand Island. The east side of Comb Ridge, where the winter sun warmed the rocks, was a favorite camping area that extended down Butler Wash all the way to the San Juan River. As the weather became milder and grasses appeared, streams like La Sal, Deer, Coyote, Two Mile, Hop, Geyser, Taylor, and Beaver flowed out of the La Sal Mountains, and Spring, North and South Montezuma, Cottonwood, Recapture and Indian Creeks poured off of Abajo or Blue Mountain, as it is known locally. Numerous springs such as Dodge, Piute, and Peters also invited the Utes to scatter and camp as they searched for food.

Favorite areas to plant small garden plots in corn, beans, squash, and melons were Montezuma and Allen Canyons, Indian Creek, Paiute Farms, and Paiute Canyon. Favorite hunting places for deer and other large animals were the La Sal, Blue, Navajo, and Sleeping Ute Mountains and Elk Ridge, while antelope were stalked in the Dry Valley area. Elk, desert bighorn and mountain sheep, wild turkeys, rabbits, badgers, beavers, bears, and fish enriched the diet. The women provided many of the edible wild plants, including pine nuts, chokecherries, yucca fruit, Indian ricegrass, wild onions and potatoes, sunflower seeds, bulrushes, serviceberries, and raspberries.

The technology to work this environment evolved with time. Ute homes reflected the mobility of a hunting and gathering society. Deerskin and elk-hide tepees were later replaced with canvas tents, with an average diameter of fourteen feet. Brush wickups, in a four-pole pattern or with poles leaned against a tree, provided shelter in the summertime.

Information on fishing techniques is sketchy. Accounts indicate fishing was a male activity, but fish were part of the general diet, with certain restrictions. Northern Utes, who are
closely allied in beliefs and practices to their southern relatives, used weirs of willow screens to direct fish into shallow waters to be speared or shot with barbed arrows. Fishing lines of braided horsehair with a bone, wood, or later a metal hook, as well as squawbush nets, provided the angler with other tools for capturing his prey. If not eaten immediately, the catch was dried, placed in deer or elkskin sacks, and stored underground in a dry place for future use. 

While fish were not a mainstay in the Southern Utes’ diet like deer and other animals, they were important enough to be incorporated into some taboos. For example, for thirty days following childbirth, a mother could not eat meat or fish without spoiling her husband’s chances of obtaining game. Likewise, if a woman ate fish during menstruation, she permanently damaged her male relatives’ hunting ability. In an animistic universe, rules prescribed acceptable interaction with nature.

Herbs and plants that grew along the river and in its surrounding canyons were also an important part of the Ute lifestyle. Today Ute informants bemoan the loss of knowledge about plant use for both food and healing. One gets the impression that all the world was once a combined pharmacopoeia and storehouse. Comb Wash was a favorite place for harvesting Indian ricegrass; the Bears Ears supplied pine nuts; in the washes and along the San Juan River, the inner layer between the bark and wood of the cottonwood tree provided a sugary sweet and food extender, and serviceberries made a tart condiment or mush. When sickness struck, Ute patients drank tea brewed from sagebrush.

Comb Wash was an excellent place for harvesting Indian ricegrass; the other side of Comb Ridge (background) was a favored winter camping spot because of its exposure to the sun and warmer temperatures. (O. C. Hansen Collection, Utah State Historical Society)
leaves; a sore throat was cured by boiling pinyon sap with grease, then applying it to the neck; the roots and flowers of sandpuff remedied stomach and bowel problems; spearmint leaves cured an upset stomach; and gumplant served as a cough syrup.\textsuperscript{13} Nursing mothers who wanted to wean their children rubbed masticated sagebrush leaves on their nipples.

The People, as part of the larger ecosystem, often struggled for survival as life went through cycles of feast and famine. Family groups remained relatively small, joining together for hunting and gathering in the late spring and hunting in the fall. Each of these bands had a leader, selected because he made wise decisions about where to obtain food and how to keep the group out of trouble. The size of these groups varied from one to ten families, but as the People lost more and more land to white encroachment, they were forced into larger concentrations, primarily in Montezuma and Allen Canyons.

Often each band also had a spiritual leader, who understood the supernatural powers associated with the land and how best to appeal to them. He went to these “power points” during the appropriate season, and, on behalf of his group, prayed, left an offering, and asked for help. The individual members of the band also prayed, but not at the power point used by the medicine man.\textsuperscript{14} Different types of spirits lived in caves, rocks, springs, rivers, and mountains and helped or harmed depending upon the way they were treated.

The world was much more than just a physical realm to sustain life. It was a gift from the Creator of All Life, Sinawav, imbued with spiritual powers. Myths and tales tell of supernatural, mystical experiences, filling the Four Corners region with a power and sense of divine meaning predating contemporary times. One story tells that Sinawav became lonely and so formed fish of different sizes and shapes from the small end of his staff, then gave them the breath of life. Next he took leaves from various trees and tossed them in the air, creating different types of birds. From the center of his staff came animals like deer, rabbits, coyotes, desert bighorn sheep, and other creatures. He believed that he had done well, but as he watched the strong prey upon the weak, he decided to create one more animal—the bear—from the large end of his staff. To this animal fell the responsibility of maintaining peace and interpreting and teaching the rules of harmony to the other animals.\textsuperscript{15}

Another story tells about the origin of the large canyons of the Four Corners area. During the time when animals and gods talked, Hawk and Sinawav went hunting together. Sinawav caught many more rabbits, making Hawk jealous, so a conflict ensued. Hawk let out a piercing scream that shook the earth, cracked its crust, and fragmented it into the canyon system that exists today.\textsuperscript{16}

One of the most interesting mythological beliefs that ties directly to the San Juan River is about Pa’ ah a pache (Water Boy), sometimes called a “water baby” or Roams along in the River. Descriptions of what this creature looks like vary. Some people say it resembles a fish with long black hair and a flowing mustache. Others say it has legs like a man instead of a tail. There are stories of both male and female water babies, one version telling what happens when a young man sleeps by a river. He may wake to find a beautiful woman in a green dress lying next to him. After he sleeps with her, she may lure him into the water to remain with her people.\textsuperscript{17}

There are many other accounts of this creature’s activity in the rivers and lakes of Utah. One tells that a woman left her baby strapped in a cradleboard by the river, then went off to do her work. While she was gone, a water baby removed the infant and climbed into the cradle. The mother did not realize what had happened, nursed the water baby, and was swallowed by the creature. Another story relates that two female water babies pulled a man into the river and took him to their home beneath the water. They wanted to marry him, but he thought they were ugly and eventually escaped. Water babies cry like humans and are often heard near the river. They supposedly accept tobacco for smoking and haunt a person’s dreams when they are mistreated, but they can also be playful, especially with older people. They also have the power to raise the level of the water temporarily.\textsuperscript{18}

Water babies exist in the San Juan River. Local tales claim they can walk on land as well as swim in water. A human baby should never be left by the river, or it may be lost; when people camp by the water, they hear the water baby crying, but when someone goes to investigate, it
slips away undetected; and people should avoid going down to the river at night. The Utes took frequent baths but only in the shallows. Even though they considered themselves good swimmers, they often held onto the mane or tail of their horse when crossing deep rivers. Swimming unassisted in deep water was considered dangerous because a water baby could pull a person down in a whirling funnel of water to drown. Recent sightings of water babies have occurred in the Colorado River.

A more powerful people called the Diné or Navajo eventually joined the Utes and Paiutes along the banks of the San Juan River. Scholars still debate when they entered the Southwest. Some argue that by the fourteenth century, the Diné, or “the People,” were migrating into the Four Corners region as the Anasazi departed. Navajo lore is replete with stories of interaction between the two groups. Most anthropologists agree that by the end of the 1500s, the Diné were spread throughout northern New Mexico, a portion of southern Utah, and part of northern Arizona. They also concur that the Navajos migrated from northern Canada with other Apachean peoples, who are linguistically related as Athapaskan speakers. Studies suggest northern groups separated from those migrating south around A.D. 1000 and that the division between Apaches and Navajos occurred about three to four hundred years ago. However, these are only rough estimates.

Navajos reject these theories, claiming there is nothing about a land bridge across the Bering Straits and subsequent descent from the north in their oral tradition. Instead, their religion teaches that they traveled through three or four worlds beneath this one and emerged in the La Plata Mountains of southwestern Colorado or the Navajo Dam area of northwestern New Mexico. The gods created the four sacred mountains—Blanca and Hesperus Peaks in Colorado, Mount Taylor in New Mexico, and the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona—intending them as supernatural boundaries within which all was safe and protected. In addition, the gods also established four sacred rivers—the Rio Grande, Colorado, Little Colorado, and San Juan—to be defensive guardians.

In addition to its religious importance, the San Juan River also acted as a line of demarcation between Navajo and Ute territories, although there were exceptions. Groups of Paiutes lived in the Monument Valley and Navajo Mountain areas which were south of the river, while small bands of Navajos hunted, gathered, grazed sheep, and lived north of it. The historic record indicates that generally, however, the San Juan River was a territorial boundary during aboriginal times.

Like the Utes, the Navajos were interested in the rich resources of a riparian environment. But unlike the Utes, who often traded for agricultural products because they practiced horticulture only on a minor scale, the Navajos depended heavily on corn, beans, and squash. The fact that the waters of the San Juan were being used in many different ways even in aboriginal times is important in understanding the later cultural and ecological history of the river.

Beyond agriculture, natural plants flourishing along the river’s banks and in tributary canyons were also intensively used. Navajo informants provide excellent information about Native American use of river plants. Wild onions, turnips, squawbush, Indian ricegrass, Rocky Mountain beeplant, and goosefoot offered a supplement to their diet of corn, beans, squash, and mutton. Cottonwoods lined the river and were used for cradleboards, fire drills, and summer cooking because their wood gives light but not much heat. Rabbitbrush steeped in water alleviated coughs, colds, headaches, and menstrual cramps and made a yellow dye for wool, while sagebrush rid sufferers of indigestion, the pain of childbirth, cold swellings, and tuberculosis.

Many older Navajos remember that the banks were “thick with squawbush and cottonwoods,” that “there were plenty of plants used as medicine herbs,” and that, “in the spring, one could see the vegetation’s rippling waves across the meadows every time the breeze blew.” Another person described that the main wash from [the mouth of] Montezuma Creek all the way to Hatch [approximately twenty miles] was filled with cottonwoods. Up on top [of the mesas], the greasewood bushes were big with huge stems. They grew higher than the hogan in some places. The horse trails went under and through this tangled top brush; it was that thick and high. But it is not like that now.
Now a lot of the natural vegetation along the river and in tributary canyons has either been washed away, removed by people, or choked out by the newly imported tamarisk, leaving only a few large cottonwoods dotting the sides of the river.

This is also true of some of the fauna. Attracted by the large cottonwood stands, beavers built their homes along the banks. They were said to be plentiful until the Navajos killed them so that “medicine men could use the skin in their medicine bags” and as material for clothing worn in the Yeii’bichai ceremony. The scent from the beaver’s castor invoked the holy beings’ power during prayers. Raccoons, said to be doctors, also inhabited the thick vegetation along the river, while prairie dogs and rabbits preferred more open spaces and provided Navajos and Utes with meat, as did the antelopes on the plains and the deer in the Sleeping Ute, Blue, La Sal, and Carrizo Mountains.54

Until recently, Navajos did not eat fish from the San Juan River. This may be attributed, in part, to a story in which the Navajos fought their cruel taskmasters, the Anasazi. The Navajos drove their enemy into a big bend of the river, but to avoid capture, the Anasazi leaped into the water and were transformed into humpback fish.55 Eating fish was taboo and was definitely not allowed after a person had a No-toah (Waterway) ceremony performed. The holy beings and creatures associated with water would be offended.

In addition to its resources, the river also supplied both a thoroughfare and a barrier. Although the river was an easily recognized boundary for Navajos and Utes during the 1860s, some Navajos still ventured beyond it and settled in Ute country around the Aneth-Montezuma Creek region, the Bears Ears, and Navajo Mountain. Dry summers facilitated travel across the river because it shrank so that people could walk or ride to the other side. During the high-water stages, Navajos tried to avoid fording the river, but if it was necessary, they crossed holding onto their horses. Oral testimony indicates that boats were rarely used by Navajos, and when they were, it was only for crossing, never for traveling any distance on the river.26

Once across the river, a traveler faced a network of trails that crisscrossed the high-desert
country. This trail system fed into locations near Montezuma Creek, Aneth, and the Four Corners Monument, partly because the way was easy and partly because of the existence of a series of canyons, comprising Mc Cracken, Montezuma, Allen, and McElmo to the north, and Desert Creek, Lone Mountain, and Tsitah to the south. Farther downriver, where canyon walls made access increasingly restricted, there were firm-bottomed crossing sites at Sand Island, Butler Wash, Comb Wash, Mule Ears (Chinle Creek), Goodridge (Mexican Hat), Clay Hills, Paiute Farms, Copper Canyon, and Trail Canyon/Wilson Creek. Minor paths connected the major network of trails that laced the barren stretches of high country to mountainous or other well-watered sites. On rare occasions, such as in 1918 when the thermometer dipped to thirty-two degrees below zero, the river became a frozen road and shortened the distance between trading posts. One trader remembers the wagons almost pushing the horses along as they skidded over the ice between Aneth and Montezuma Creek.

The Navajos, like the Utes, gave place names to thousands of geographical features throughout the Four Corners region. Often one place had two or three different titles, not all of which were generally known. Names could be derived from mythological events, personal experience, the type of resource available, a historic occurrence, the shape of a land feature, or where certain people lived. Take the Aneth region, for instance. This area played a key role in the history of Navajos living along the Lower San Juan. Because McElmo Creek empties into the river near a wide floodplain suitable for planting crops and travel, it was natural for people to congregate here to plant crops. T’aa biich’iidii is its most popular name, derived from the government farmer, Herbert Redshaw, who lived there in the early 1900s. He walked slowly, deliberately, in an almost-robotic fashion; hence, one explanation of his name is that it means “just his devil or ghost within.” Another is that he used to cuss and tell people to “go to the devil,” while a third asserts that he was as “slow as the devil.” Whatever the reason, the name stuck and has become the official title of the Aneth Chapter. Another place name for Aneth is Big Ears or Wiggling Ears, a description of a trader with a prominent physical feature. Still other names tantalize with the stories they imply, such as Barely Enough Pep to Make It and A Good Place to Stay Away From. Aneth is also known as Black Mountain [Sleeping Ute] Wash [McElmo Creek] Joins In.

Montezuma Creek is called Where the Sagebrush Wash Drains into the River but also has other epithets such as Black Hat, alluding to Bill Young, who established a post there; Mosi or Cat, after an earlier trader called Old Cat; Flew Back Out, and Large Eyes. Some place names in the Aneth-Montezuma Creek area are associated with economic activity, such as Among the Prairie Dogs, because Navajos transplanted these animals to add to their food resources. Other spots are called Clay (used in ceremonies), Spring in the Sour Berry [Squaw] Bush, Gather Yucca, and Corn Bush.

Place names between the Four Corners Monument and Montezuma Creek also mark events, such as Soldiers’ Crossing, given during the 1906 Bai-a-lil-le disturbance; Reclaiming the Horses, in remembrance of a woman who caught some Utes stealing her horses so she whipped and scolded them; and To Look at One Another, bestowed on a trail on a hill that was narrow enough to make passersby acknowledge each other.

As Navajos settled this area, geography also helped establish limits for land use. One Navajo tells that her two relatives, Woman from Blanding and Old Gray, came over a hill above Montezuma Creek and outlined the boundaries of their new home. Woman from Blanding declared, “From that juniper-covered hill to White Point, down the gray ridge to Stair Formation Rock, and across to Fallen House—this is how big our land will be.”

In one case, the action of the river even suggested a name. According to Cyrus Begay, a Navajo elder who has lived in this region for close to a century, [the San Juan] would rise, causing some erosion of the banks and washing the trees and vegetation away by their roots. This vegetation accumulated in certain parts of the river, creating dams higher than this hogan and causing the river to take an alternate path. Before too long, the riverbed had widened. Just this side
[eastern end] of Montezuma Creek is a place called Revived Vegetation. This spot was formed in two years after the river switched to the other side, giving it a chance to thicken with assorted green vegetation. It was beautiful. But after a few years of occasional flooding, the area washed away. This is its [section of the river’s] history.

Yet beyond the physical resources and dynamic shifts of the river, there lies a fascinating body of lore, based on mythology and spirituality, that is deeply rooted in Navajo thought. Since everything is connected within the Navajo universe, to speak of the river as a single, separate entity does violence to prevailing viewpoints. On the other hand, references to San Juan River appear in many of the myths, which provide the basis for Navajo interaction with the river. Here is a summary of pertinent aspects of these beliefs.

Navajo tradition tells that the People lived in either three or four worlds (depending on the version of the myth) beneath this one. In the preceding worlds, everything was created spiritually before it was conceived physically, including the San Juan River. Indeed, the four rivers that bound Navajo lands today were all in place in the world beneath this glittering world. When the holy beings entered this sphere, they brought the knowledge and materials to recreate a physical replica of the world they had left and imbue it with animistic forces.

Water was the force that caused the Navajos to abandon the previous world. One account of this story central to Navajo beliefs tells that Coyote, the traditional trickster, stole Water Monster’s two babies. Water Monster (Tehooltsodii—One Who Grabs in Deep Water) controlled all the waters in the earth as well as those on the surface and, when he recognized the theft, flew into a rage. He opened all the gates that held back the waters and successfully flooded the entire fourth world. Coyote, along with the other inhabitants, fled before the wall of water.

Eventually, through trial, error, and sacrifice, the People found a way into this world.
They then discovered that Coyote had concealed the water babies in his coat and the flooding waters were sent as revenge for his action. The Diné returned the babies to their parent and offered ntł’iz—a ceremonial gift of precious stones and shell—to appease Water Monster. Implicit in this story is the suggestion that these creatures are associated with rain. Sacred offerings of ntł’iz at springs and rivers may summon desired moisture which Water Monster controls, as do other holy forces in nature.

This abbreviated account of the creation story is important because it introduces Water Monster, a creature whose offspring inhabit rivers, lakes, and oceans. In this world, the main Water Monster resides in the ocean to the east (Atlantic) and is chief of the Water People there. The mythological First Woman is said to have recognized some types of fish, clams, crabs, seals, and other forms of water life as her neighbors in the world below this, so Navajos today do not eat them because they could be friends from an earlier time.

Water Monster lives in a home within the depths of a body of water. Spinning, funnel-shaped whirls are entrances into his chambers, where he drags his victims. Outside his home is Water Monster’s pet, a water horse (teeh lii—‘deep water pet’ [horse]), which is a guardian. Water Monsters have fine fur like an otter and horns like a buffalo, while their young may be spotted with various colors. Some people say they look more like a buffalo or hippopotamus. Water animals such as beavers, otters, muskrats, fish, frogs, and turtles, as well as waterfowl, live within the domain of Water Monster and are not eaten, though otter and beaver skins may be used for clothing and rackets. A turtle shell with pebbles also makes a good rattle. Even a sheep, an animal free from most restrictive taboos, cannot be eaten if it has drowned in the river.

The Navajos have a deep respect for the power of water, lightning, and other natural forces. One story relates that a mythological hero, Monster Slayer, visited the home of Water Monster and demanded back all the people who had been drowned, struck by lightning, or lost in quicksand or marshes. Water Monster had no desire to let them go, so Monster Slayer set the water on fire and forced their release. The people were ecstatic over their newfound freedom; Water Monster only grumbled that he would “take some of your people once in a while,” thus explaining what happens to those struck by lightning or drowned today.

The Waterway ceremony removes the effects of a damaging experience an individual has had with drowning, near drowning, or dreams of drowning. The mythological basis for the ceremony explains that a man visited Water Monster to beg release of a drowned grandson. The captive, as well as the rescuer, was covered with green slime, but both were finally released. Frog, Turtle, Otter, Beaver, and the Thunder People performed a bathing ceremony that eventually cleansed the captives from the limiting effects of the slime. This ceremony is still performed today.

Another story tells of a mythological character named He Who Teaches Himself, who journeys down the San Juan River inside a hollow log fashioned by the holy beings and protected by clouds, rainbows, and other supernatural aids. After a series of adventures, the hero is brought to Water Monster’s home, freed only after the gods intervene, and returned to his normal state by Frog, who shows him how to prepare a special cigarette. It is painted black for Water Monster, blue for the water horse, yellow for otters and beavers, and white for frogs and great fish. When a person nearly drowns, he or she smokes this specially prepared cigarette to alleviate the water sickness. Not everyone is fortunate enough to escape the effects of the river and water creatures. The San Juan River has claimed its fair share of lives. In 1993 a Navajo teenager was swimming and drowned in the river at Mexican Hat. Law enforcement officials, river rangers, and community members made numerous attempts to recover the body but failed. Religious leaders in the area believed the drowning represented Water Monster taking one of the People home to his kingdom as a sign that the Navajos must return to traditional ways. This view is part of the teachings concerning life on the river.

The San Juan River is not only destructive, however; it is also portrayed as a helpful, protective power. For instance, it is designated as one of the four sacred rivers and marks the northern boundary of Navajo lands. Known as Old Age River, Male Water, One with a Long,
Body, and One with a Wide Body, the San Juan has been described as an old man with hair of white foam, a snake wriggling through the desert, a flash of lightning, and a black club of protection to keep invaders from Navajo lands.\textsuperscript{41}

The river has a spirit of its own that can be asked for help. Many older people today stop their cars and offer corn pollen as they cross the water. Charlie Blueeyes, a longtime resident near the river, explains,

This water can hear you. You offer it corn pollen when you are going for something, such as buying a horse, as a shield against harsh words said to you, when going to play cards at Towaoc (Utes), on a hunting expedition, or just traveling around. When you are on foot, you say, “I am going over you, my grandmother.” You do not tell it I am going into you. You put the corn pollen on the edge of the river. The river is holy.\textsuperscript{42}

Other people tell that they “plead with the river’s holy being,” that “the holy people right there are listening,” and that “all nationalities—white, Mexican, and other Indians—would not discriminate” against the traveler, whose wishes will be answered.\textsuperscript{43} Another says, “It is our boundary or shield. Corn pollen is given to it to bring good health to the mind and body and your transportation, whether it is a horse or an automobile. . . . You sprinkle the pollen with the flow of the river. When you are coming back, you use the other hand to sprinkle the corn pollen because it is like you are traveling.”\textsuperscript{44}

This concept of the river and other topographical features serving as a shield is a common motif that runs throughout Navajo thinking.\textsuperscript{45} Nowhere is this more dramatically revealed than in the teachings about Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge. Karl Luckert, a specialist in Native American religions, published a series of interviews with Navajo elders and medicine men in \textit{Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge Religion}. A brief overview of some of these teachings illustrates the intensity of religious thought concerning the river and environs.

The San Juan is considered a male river, the Colorado a female, and where they join (Water Comes Together) near Rainbow Bridge is the place where clouds and moisture were physically created. Prayers and offerings of corn pollen and \textit{ntl'iz} prompted the holy beings to bless the land with water and provide protection from non-Navajo enemies. Thus, Protectionway ceremonies focus on this area because of the mythological teachings linking the mountain, the arch, and the river.\textsuperscript{46}

The sacredness of this area and the canyons bordering the San Juan nearby is attested to by both Navajo and white observers. Ernest Nelson, a prominent medicine man from the Shonto area, commented,

The Black Club [San Juan River] was laid down in the north so that people other than the Navajo people would be prevented from wandering about in this sacred area. And even we [the Navajo people] are not to wander into those sacred places without a purpose. And if we do [go there, we should do it] only in a prescribed manner, by placing offerings and by speaking ceremonial prayers at places which were put there in those times by the holy people.\textsuperscript{47}

Historical testimony indicates these beliefs were practiced. Walter Mendenhall, a miner on the Lower San Juan in the 1890s, noted that it was very difficult to induce Navajos into the canyons bordering the river. He explained, “We never could get an Indian to go down with us into a canyon. They hear the rocks rolling down there and say it is the Great Spirit. They attribute the noise from rolling rocks to a supernatural cause and seem to believe that the canyons are inhabited by spirits.”\textsuperscript{48}

Today the situation has totally reversed. Because of the dammed waters of Lake Powell, the junction of the San Juan and Colorado can only be guessed by medicine men, so no creation of new water can occur. The rise and fall of the lake create concern about the erosion of the base of Rainbow Bridge and the possibility of collapse. And most importantly, the high waters of the lake and a new boating dock near the bridge have made access by tourists an easy, pleasurable adventure but a frustrating experience for traditional Navajos, who in the past worshiped here.

Indeed the canyons of the Glen Canyon Recreation Area, instead of serving as a shield against foreign elements, act like a magnet to draw crowds of vacationers to this sun-soaked, redrock country. For example, a marina in
Forbidden Canyon near Rainbow Bridge became "the largest waterside gas station west of the Mississippi River and the single most profitable Chevron station anywhere." Because of congestion, it was moved in 1984 to the less-restricted Dangling Rope Canyon. Still, this has not deterred the growing swarm of visitors to the bridge. In 1997 there were approximately 180,000; in 1998, 196,000; as of September of 1999, 210,000, or roughly a 10 percent increase each year. The future portends more of the same.

Court decisions in 1974 and again in 1980 gave no help to the Navajos trying to protect the bridge. Business and the waters from the Glen Canyon Dam held sway over the ruling, which said that Rainbow Bridge would remain accessible to the public. In 1995 a small group of medicine men, youthful Navajo advocates, and sympathetic whites closed entry to the bridge for four days to renew this sacred site for worship through blessing. But generally, it is no longer desirable for ceremonial use. The holy beings have fled, and in their place, or at least accompanying them, is a growing politicization of Native American religious rights.

Although as many as one thousand boaters a day visit Rainbow Bridge, small groups of Navajos, San Juan and Southern Paiutes, and White Mesa Utes voice increasing opposition to this abuse of a sacred site. Park Service signs and rangers can request respect but cannot prevent tourists from wandering beyond boundaries and off established paths, littering, and in other ways showing disregard for traditional land ethics. Even the shin-high wall built in 1995 to keep people contained does not stop those determined to do what they want.

What answer is agreeable to both sides of the issue? Court cases attempting to enforce protective elements of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1988) in other parts of the country have been generally unsuccessful. Even the short-term closure of the bridge to tourists in 1995 drew strong opposition from a number of groups. Perhaps education grounded
in mutual respect will prove the most effective means to change things. As the public becomes more sensitive to Native American beliefs, a greater tolerance for practices will follow. It is all a matter of perspective.

In summarizing the traditional attitudes toward the San Juan River by Utes and Navajos, a spiritual, religious view emerges as strongly as a pragmatic use of riparian resources. For both groups, the two approaches were not separate. The gods were as much a part of the physical realm as water, minerals, and the dynamic forces of nature. Just as human beings are composed of spiritual and physical sides, so, too, is the river. That is why a resident from Navajo Mountain described the river in one breath as a male body of water loaded with spiritual significance, and in the next, told of its physical wealth. He concluded by saying, “Similarly that is how our life is, and life is progressing. Birth and growth: This is what the river represents. This is how it is told. It is not just a river that flows.”54