

McCain: T.R. or W?

The GOP nominee often invokes Teddy Roosevelt, but his conservation record is closer to a more recent president's

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McCain's work on behalf of the Grand Canyon endeared him to conservationists. His dealings with another Arizona landmark, however, have put him on the permanent black list of many an enviro.

Over the years, McCain has often described the San Pedro River in southern Arizona as "a national treasure" whose loss would be a "national disaster." The San Pedro hosts the second-most biologically diverse array of mammals in the world, second only to the Costa Rican cloud forests. It's also a crucial flyway for millions of migratory songbirds.

The high-desert stream is supported during the driest times of the year by groundwater that seeps into the streambed. But steady groundwater pumping by the booming community of Sierra Vista -- and the thousands of wells being drilled by local homeowners, ranchers and farmers -- are threatening to drain the river. The driving economic force in the growing area is the Army's Fort Huachuca.

During the 1990s, environmental lawsuits forced the Army to dramatically decrease groundwater pumping on the base in order to protect endangered species that depend on the San Pedro. Because the local economy is so closely tied to the fort, the federal court rulings also held it responsible for a substantial portion of off-base groundwater pumping. By 2003, concern over Fort Huachuca's impact on the San Pedro River put it at risk of being downsized during a looming round of military base closures.

McCain was faced with a choice: Preserve the river, or save the military base. He chose the base. Despite pressure from national environmental groups and editorials in Arizona's major newspapers, McCain supported legislation that exempted the fort from most of its prior responsibility for maintaining the San Pedro's water levels. The "Fort Huachuca Preservation Act" was offered by freshman Rep. Rick Renzi, an Arizona Republican whose late father, Eugene Renzi, was an executive in ManTech International -- a company with more than \$500 million worth of contracts at the fort. Despite Renzi's clear conflict of interest, McCain adopted most of his language during a House-Senate Armed Services Conference Committee hearing, assuring passage of the provision.

Environmentalists were outraged. "We told Sen. McCain that his legislative exemption for Fort Huachuca would end up killing the San Pedro River," says Robin Silver, conservation chairman for the Tucson-based environmental group Center for Biological Diversity. "He chose to ignore us, and now the river is predictably suffering."

Within weeks of passing the bill, McCain acknowledged that the San Pedro River is doomed. "It's not a matter of whether it will dry up, it's when it will dry up," McCain told residents in southern Arizona's Cochise County in December 2003.

Conditions on the San Pedro have steadily declined since President Bush signed the bill into law five years ago. Robert Mac Nish, the retired Arizona state director of the U.S. Geological Survey, has repeatedly warned that the river will disappear unless immediate action is taken to supplement its water supplies.

McCain has responded by sponsoring a bill that authorizes the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to look for ways to bring water to southeast Arizona, to preserve the river and to supply the communities tied to Fort Huachuca. One proposal is to extend the Central Arizona Project canal from its terminus near Tucson another 90 miles to Sierra Vista -- an expensive public-works project few expect Congress to approve.

In February, Renzi stepped down as the Arizona co-chair of McCain's campaign after he was named in a 35-count federal indictment for allegedly using his position in Congress to include an associate's land next to the San Pedro River in a proposed federal land swap. His trial is set for early next year.

McCain's conservationist ethic continues to be shadowed by doubt as the presidential campaign heats up.

In May, both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* called into question his support of two separate federal land swaps; the exchanges, one of which has been called the largest in the state's history, benefited top McCain campaign fund-raisers. In 2007, the Arizona senator sponsored another controversial land swap (the same one that got Renzi into trouble), which would clear the way for a multinational conglomerate to mine a huge copper deposit located about 70 miles east of Phoenix. Though some conservationists support

the exchange -- it would preserve some sections of the lower San Pedro River -- it has come under attack by several Indian tribes who regard the area to be mined as sacred.

This summer, McCain called for the construction of 45 nuclear power plants as part of his plans to combat global warming. At the same time, he has done nothing to slow a new uranium push in northern Arizona, an area that is still grappling with the effects of the Cold War uranium boom.

For more than eight months, McCain has refused to meet with elected officials, Indian leaders, environmentalists, water utilities and other stakeholders seeking to protect the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon from another round of uranium mining. Approximately 10,000 mining claims have been staked on federal lands adjacent to the park in the last five years in areas with some of the highest-grade uranium ore in the country.

"McCain has a historic record of caring about the Grand Canyon," says Don Hancock, director of nuclear waste programs for the Southwest Research and Information Center, an Albuquerque environmental group, "but he's been absent from this discussion about uranium development around the Grand Canyon."

Meanwhile, an abandoned uranium mine inside the park less than three miles west of the famous El Tovar Hotel continues to contaminate a creek below the South Rim. The National Park Service has declared the Orphan Mine a Superfund site. But the responsible parties, two major defense contractors, have refused to pay to clean it up.

McCain's silence on uranium mining near the park he says he loves makes quite a contrast to the bold statements of his hero. Roosevelt pleaded to Americans to "keep this great wonder of nature as it is, Å¶ You cannot improve on it ... man can only mar it."

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