

The Grand Canyon Overflights Mess: Soundscape of Nowhere

By Dick Hingson

“Not a solitary sound emerges from those depths. It is as though all the silences and hushes of Time beyond imagining have drifted into the Canyon and filled it to the brim.” -- Robert Wallace

In soundscape appreciation, as with other remarkable Canyon features/phenomena, there is a measurable bio-physical dimension (see first sentence of above quote). But, here it's more than virtual Silence; it is the exceptional context of the vast Canyon which creates that Silence. That's where are at stake the intangible values, the ultimate concerns that motivate and inspire people wanting to immerse themselves in this priceless experience, to attune to this dramatic place of mind, heart, imagination, mystery, and indeed the numinous.

So, in context, the value of the Canyon's natural quiet here takes on extraordinary value. The matter-of-fact baseline is described by the NPS as the *“natural ambient sound conditions found in the Grand Canyon National Park, in the absence of mechanical noise.”*

The natural quiet, so simply described by the Service in 1994, and more eloquently by many a poet and writer, continues exceedingly at risk. Twenty years have elapsed since the National Parks Overflights Act of 1987 first elevated this once wondrous, unbroken quiet, by recognizing the aviation-imperiled Grand Canyon National Park soundscape as worthy of an expeditious “substantial restoration.” Within the coming four weeks – after all of these years—this protracted endeavor reaches a long-standing presidential deadline (April 22, 2008) for completion. This restoration was mandated to be timely accomplished according to specifications, standards, and tolerances established by the National Park Service, with the FAA role limited to safety.

We therefore now must call the responsible Federal agencies (NPS and FAA) to task, to accountability. Have they completed even nearly what was plainly directed under the Overflights Act, promised by the Clinton presidential directive of 1996 (as based on the Park Service' 1994 Report to Congress), then interpreted fully by the Courts in 2002, and is now Due in Full, in the Park -- in the very season now upon us??

No more effective “weapons of mass acoustic destruction” exist in the Canyon (affecting nearly all of the Park's backcountry and wilderness acreage) than the *aircraft*: helicopter tours, fixed-wing tours, yes, even the high flying commercial jets. Individual aircraft have audible noise profiles that spread miles and miles into the Canyon regardless of the height above the River. A hundred thousand air tours, and as many high flying aircraft, course through the Grand Canyon' airspace annually.

In the late 1980's, early, valuable steps were taken to stop the vertical and horizontal free-for-alls of noisy air tours in and over the Canyon. A "special airspace" was established, with flights below the Rim prohibited. A sunset and sunrise curfew was placed on the East End in 1996, followed by capping the air tour operations at 93,700 operations a year, straightening certain air tour routes away from the River in the western half of the Canyon. Nothing, so far, has been done regarding the strings of noisy jets that impact the Canyon's silent places hourly and daily. The East End—the "historic" Park—is hammered with unacceptable helicopter noise, in particular.

The Park Service by policy established definition of just what is SRNQ. It is conceptualized as two ranges:

- 50 – 80% of the Park acreage
- 75 – 100% of time free of aircraft noise

This yields a midrange target of about 65% of the Park quiet 85-90% of the time, if the goal is achieved. The NPS promised this quite clearly, and repeatedly, in its 1995 Report to Congress. This standard has not been nearly met, under the current definitions, after all of these years. In fact, only 3 percent of the Park yet meets it, and this is thanks not to the agencies as much as to the pre-existing noise power of the mighty River rapids stretches, which at close range can mask aircraft noise.

However, the NPs and FAA still promise that within two years, in time for the 2010 season, and though two years late, they will implement a Preferred Alternative that does the job (out of the current range of six on the table for eventual public comment in early 2009.)

This will require a much larger flight-free zone on the east end, that what's now in place—also enthusiastic and appropriate deployment of tools such as expanded respite times/seasons, lowered operations caps, quiet technology, etc. Long term needs under the next administration will be (1) jet noise phase-out over the "Heart of the Park"; (2) monitoring and enforcement of increased constraints on air tours and (3) accepted, quality standards for permissible Park/ wilderness noise, coordinated with a Park Soundscape Management Plan.