

Preserving a wild river ride China's Grand Canyon

By Scott Willoughby

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Numerous dam projects are on the drawing board for the Salween River in Southeast Asia. A group of Coloradans set out to bring attention to the resource. (Courtesy of Jason Moore)

As the longest free-flowing river in Southeast Asia, the Salween - or Nu Jiang - is considered one of China's richest, untapped resources. The true treasure, it turns out, is only just beginning to reveal itself.

Tumbling from Himalayan headwaters and roaring across the Tibetan Plateau, the Salween River is shrouded in mystery and controversy as it courses between steep canyons and towering peaks some 1,500 miles to the Andaman Sea. The "angry river," as Nu Jiang translates, has become a battleground in modern-day China, an environmental lightning rod in the rapidly developing nation home to more than half its vast watershed. The tempest revolves around a plan to build as many as 13 dams, creating the world's largest cascade dam system through a region designated in 2003 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site deemed "the area of richest biodiversity in China and maybe the most biologically diverse temperate region on Earth." Spanning most of Tibet and the Yunnan province before crossing to Myanmar, the river passes through a mountainous region of China with more than 7,000 species of plants and 80 rare or endangered creatures. The region is often referred to as "China's Grand Canyon." Given the nation's penchant for hydroelectric power, it is likely to soon become China's Lake Meade.

Due to its isolated location, little is known about the Salween. Until recently, much of it had never been explored. Last month, however, a Colorado-led group tapped into what some believe may be a raw vein of white gold.

"Mainly what we wanted to do was go and see what was there," said Travis Winn of Grand Junction. "The question is: Should China or should it not protect the river? So the

idea of going out and finding a Grand Canyon-like river - and I think we actually found one of that quality - is pretty significant. If we can inspire people and get them to think about it that way, protecting the resource becomes much more possible."



Jason Moore, 37, says he wanted an adventure that was untamed, and that's what he got when the group found itself in the monsoon season. (Courtesy of Jason Moore / Kyle George)

Winn, 23, is co-owner of Last Descents River Expeditions (www.lastdescents.com), a whitewater rafting company that led an exploration of nearly 200 miles of the Salween through Tibet in mid-September. Son of former Grand Canyon river guide Pete Winn, the young guide set out with a makeshift crew of experienced clients from Colorado, Montana and Germany for a well-executed adventure of a lifetime.

The team of 16, including Winn's 18-year-old sister, Carmen and Chinese business partner, Na Ming Hui, rafted and kayaked an estimated 190 miles of the Salween from its confluence with the Gyel Chu River.

The Salween, in particular, delivered the sort of remote, big-water adventure that only the mighty Himalayas can provide - some 35 rapids with waves measuring up to 20 feet from crest to trough, encased in vertical granite gorges with surrounding peaks standing 20,000 feet tall.

"I was looking for a true expedition," said Jason Moore, 37, a physician's assistant and former raft guide from Vail who joined the team at the prompting of Eric Ladd. "I didn't want something that anyone had had any part of, and I didn't want anything that anyone knew too much about. I wanted the opportunity to really get out there and to do it right because there aren't many chances to do something like this left in the world."

Reality becomes adventure

Upon arriving in Tibet, Moore and company (including Coloradans Jenny Ladd of Denver, Dick Moore of Crawford and his neighbor, Craig Childs) discovered a bit more "reality" than they had bargained for. An extended monsoon season over the Himalayas saw the rivers swell to dangerous levels, forcing the crew to rebuild washed-out bridges on an already harrowing drive to the put-in and wait out the weather for several days in a Buddhist monastery.

With only satellite imaging and declassified Russian army maps, the group hesitantly launched with an estimated additional waterflow of 10,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) joining the anticipated 25,000 cfs in the river basin. As fate would have it, they encountered the largest rapids on the first day - a lengthy Class 5 landslide Moore dubbed "Waimea" after the big Hawaiian surf spot.

"That's when I knew it was real. I initially looked at it and my first statement was, 'I'm not going to run it,'" said Moore, who captained one of three 16-foot catarafts. The more pressing issue now is: What's next for this special river run deemed an instant classic?

Opening eyes to river's call

The good news, Winn said, is this particular multiday epic is several hundred miles upstream of any proposed dams. The hope is that exposure from this and future commercial trips on the Salween will ultimately trickle downstream and offer the remainder of the drainage some protection as its value as an eco-tourism attraction is brought to light.

"The thing we need right now is more people out on the water. We're the only company registered to run multiday river trips in China. We need competitors. We need that critical mass and everything that comes along with it before we can ever really influence the government," Winn said. "What we found out is that this stretch of river is absolutely incredible and it's probably suitable for commercial river running. The trick is trying to figure out how to bring it to a Chinese audience. But if we can get safe trips going from any clients in the world, that's something the government entities may pay attention to. I think it's just a matter of time."

Winn, a college student who dedicates a good portion of his life to a nonprofit organization called the China Rivers Project (www.chinarivers.com), believes the 200-mile gem his most recent expedition opened up will take off once local guides are trained, outfitting businesses are established and China's nouveau rich learn to embrace the sport of whitewater boating. Whether that must occur before the river is considered worth protecting is the bigger question, he said.

As far as Moore is concerned, the answer is obvious. "Being in a place like this, learning about it and recognizing it for what it is, it's special, and it opened my eyes to a lot of things. Not just Tibetan culture, but just to the river itself, which I never would have known of or heard the plight of," he said. "The Grand Canyon is something different than what I am looking for out of a trip like this. But if I could have one thing happen from this trip it would be that the Salween River, especially the area we did, would get the national recognition and protection that the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon gets."

That acknowledgment ultimately may serve as the difference between recognizing the expedition as the first descent down an unknown national treasure, or perhaps the last.

On the Web: <http://www.salweenfirstdescent.com/>, <http://www.lastdescents.com/>,
<http://www.salweenwatch.org/>