

Deep divide over Grand Canyon tourism plans

Plans to build hotels, restaurants and an amphitheatre at one of America's most breathtaking natural landmarks has triggered furious debate. Do the perils of tourism outweigh the benefits?



On the edge: Some are worried that the canyon will be spoiled forever by the development © PA

Could this be the end of the Grand Canyon?, cries one alarmed headline. Another warns of 'the most serious threat the park has faced in its 95-year history.' A third simply declares that the canyon is 'doomed'. What could have prompted such a grim forecast for the six million-year-old geological wonder?

Tourists — hordes of them.

The Grand Canyon, a massive gorge in the US state of Arizona, is one of the seven wonders of the natural world, famous for breathtaking views that stretch over 277 miles of vast, practically deserted land. But that could be about to change.

Looking eastward from the canyon's popular South Rim, construction cranes could soon clutter the perfect view if developers get the go-ahead to build restaurants, shops and hotels in the Navajo Indian reservation.

They hope to build a cable-car system

that will whisk visitors a mile down to the canyon's floor, where they will be able to stroll alongside the Colorado river, dine at a restaurant and visit an amphitheatre. Developers estimate that the work will attract a further three million visitors each year, on top of the five million the canyon already receives.

Critics say the views across the canyon will be ruined, and the development will place a huge burden on the area's delicate ecology and limited water supplies.

The cable-car is a particularly sensitive subject for local Native American tribes. Developers intend to build it at the point where the Colorado and Little Colorado rivers meet: land considered sacred by the Navajo, Hopi and Zuni people. To them, the rivers represent male and female and their merging is the point where all life begins.

All over the world, tourism brings both prosperity — and peril. Destinations

such as Venice and ancient sites in Peru are increasingly under threat from vast numbers of visitors, who can travel far more cheaply and with greater ease than ever before. But the money tourism generates also boosts local and national economies and instills national pride.

A GRAND MISTAKE?

Developers say the new construction will enhance the Grand Canyon experience by allowing visitors to see a new perspective from within the canyon's depths. Moreover, the plans will create jobs for local people and bring in revenue for the Navajo tribe.

But others are horrified at what they see as the commercialisation of their natural heritage. A small group of entrepreneurs have no right to profit from a landscape that is, according to one critic, 'the birthright and responsibility of every American'. These developments, should they go ahead, will ruin the canyon's incredible grandeur forever.



Q I don't live near the Grand Canyon — does this affect me?

A You may wish to visit it one day. Perhaps you like the idea of seeing it largely untouched by humans or maybe you would want to travel down to the canyon's bottom and dine in a restaurant there. Even if you

have no desire to go, this story raises an important question for all of us: Are there any parts of the natural world that we are willing to protect?

Q Why do people visit it?

A The canyon attracts people due to its sheer scale and dramatic rock formations. It reminds us that however impressive our achievements seem, the force and beauty of nature has the power to awe and humble

us. Depending on your view, this is a reason to enable more people to see the canyon, or an argument to stop humans encroaching on its natural beauty.



SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Leave it as it is. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it.' Teddy Roosevelt

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Deep divide over Grand Canyon tourism plans

WORD WATCH

Grand canyon – The canyon has been carved out by the Colorado River over 17 million years and eroded by ice, wind and water. It is 277 miles long, up to 18 miles wide, and a mile deep.

Navajo indian reservation – A semi-autonomous Native American-governed territory, which occupies parts of Arizona, Utah and New Mexico. The development plan is

now pending before the Navajo Nation Council.

Critics – It is not the first time building plans at the canyon have provoked controversy. In 2007, a transparent horseshoe-shaped bridge called Skywalk was built in the Grand Canyon West area by the Hualapai Indian tribe.

Venice – More than 60,000 tourists visit the Italian city each day.

But huge cruise ships which bring many of them damage the lagoon, cause waves that erode the foundations of buildings, contribute to pollution and dwarf the city's monuments.

Peru – Tourism is one of Peru's largest industries, and one of its biggest draws is the ancient Inca Machu Picchu citadel. But with thousands of visitors every day, the site is slowly being eroded by tourists' feet.

YOU DECIDE

1. Will the Grand Canyon benefit or suffer as a result of more visitors?
2. Is more tourism generally good for an area or bad?

ACTIVITIES

1. In groups, see if you can name the other six natural wonders of the world. Check to see if you are right, and whether you can locate where they are.
2. Choose one of the world's most popular tourist destinations. Write a case study explaining the impact visitors are having on that place.

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