



A river runs through it. For now

For centuries the power of the Colorado River has created the magnificent peaks and troughs of the Grand Canyon. But, suggests Amber Melville-Brown, uranium mining in the region may be a foe to which even the mighty river may fall

Are you en route to the Grand Canyon? If not, you should be. Having successfully returned from a day's hike down – and up – the canyon's precipitous inclines, I feel a special bond with the vast hole in the world. My first glimpse of its red, green and gold walls of rock literally took my breath away (as did the subsequent nine-and-a-half-hour onslaught over its craggy slopes). A one-day descent and return is not recommended by the rangers who

Will our children enjoy the privilege of seeing the gargantuan Grand Canyon?

call this beautiful wilderness home. Nor by yours truly. Not because it wasn't a tremendous experience, but because it is quite possible to die. Alarming signs on the trail declare: "Getting to the bottom is not necessary. Getting to the top is mandatory."

If you do descend to the canyon's depths, sensibly camping overnight midway, you will be rewarded by the welcoming sight of the Colorado River; in winter a bubbling froth of hot chocolate, in summer a vibrant, pulsating green, irresistible to hot, tired toes. Whether you view the spectacular canyon from within or above, a visit should be on everyone's wish-list. And perhaps there's no better time than now. Especially if you want to avoid uranium poisoning.

Earlier this year the lobby organisation Environment Working Group reported a significant surge in uranium mining claims within five miles of the Grand Canyon National Park, warning that these activities could expose the waters of the Colorado River – watering flora and fauna across Arizona and beyond, not to mention 25 million people – to toxic radiation.

Seemingly answering these concerns, this summer the US House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources voted in favour of a resolution requiring the Secretary of

Interior to withdraw public lands around the canyon from new claims and exploration. But in October, the Centre for Biological Diversity, Grand Canyon Trust and Sierra Club Grand Canyon Chapter was forced to file a suit against the Secretary of Interior for authorising uranium exploration in apparent defiance of this resolution.

An aim of the Environmental Working Group is to shine a light on what it describes as "unsettling facts that you have a right to know".

The potential pollution of one of the world's great natural wonders certainly seems to fit within that category. But countering this unsettling fact is news of the valiant legal battle being waged in the courts by the Centre for Biological Diversity and partners. The centre includes as one of its missions, "to secure a future for all species, greatest and small, hovering on the brink of extinction... through science, law, and creative media, with a focus on protecting the lands, waters and climate that species need to survive."

Its mission could not be more perfectly suited to the protection of this special region. Whether the court will agree to enforce the resolution remains to be seen. Until then, the future of the magnificent Canyon and the Colorado River hangs in the balance.

It would be overly cynical to suggest that business concerns will automatically win over environmental ones. But, just in case, make every effort to get to – if not into – the canyon without delay; it may not be grand for much longer. ■