

Where is the “Real” Grand Canyon?

Yolonda Youngs

This place will always challenge those who think of it as one place, *the* Grand Canyon, to be captured in its entirety in a single picture—a daunting notion, a fool’s errand.
—Stephen Trimble, *Lasting Light*

Contemporary visitors to the Grand Canyon often have a difficult time trying to find the place they traveled to see.

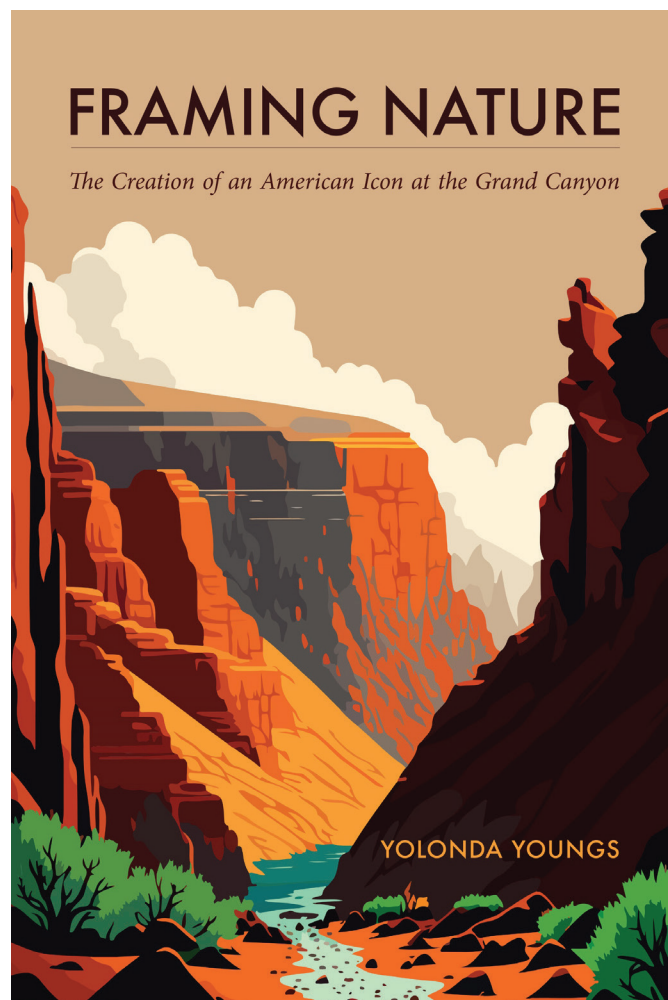
Grand Canyon National Park encompasses over 1.2 million acres, 277 river miles, and a canyon a mile deep and 10 miles wide. How could a contemporary canyon visitor not find this immense landscape feature?

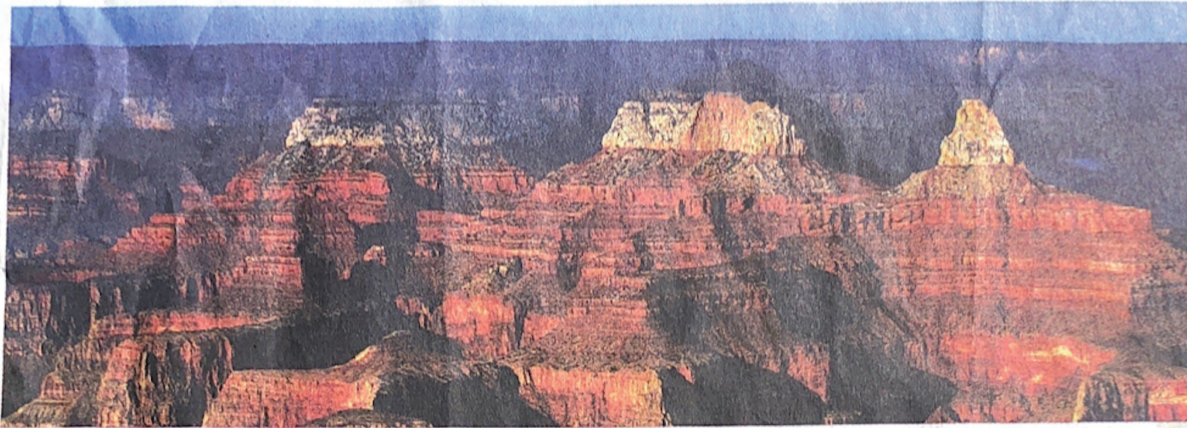
The culprit, it seems, is competing publicity and historic geographic associations for valuable (visual) resources. A 2008 *Arizona Republic* article titled “Which Grand Canyon Is the Real Grand Canyon?” illuminates some of the contests for visitor dollars associated with authentic canyon experiences, place-based tourism, and reclaimed or reappropriated geographic locations (figure, next page). Notably, both viewpoints are situated on the rim looking into the Grand Canyon with spectacular panoramic views of the canyon’s depths and extent. One rim view is located inside the administrative boundaries of Grand Canyon National Park, at Grand Canyon Village, managed by the National Park Service. The “other” rim view is at a place known as Grand Canyon West, on the Hualapai Indian Reservation, owned and operated by the Hualapai Tribe. Following the historic arc of popular Grand Canyon images over time from postcards through photographs, tourists have been trained to seek out the iconic rim-side views of the Grand Canyon from NPS sites within Grand Canyon National Park, specifically along the South Rim trail near El Tovar Hotel in Grand Canyon Village or the North Rim view near Grand Canyon Lodge at Bright Angel Point.

The Hualapai’s development of Grand Canyon West, however, offers an “alternative to the Grand Canyon National Park” (Hualapai Tribe n.d.). Grand Canyon West is located on the southwest rim of the canyon about 250 miles west of Grand Canyon Village. Geographically, it is closer to Las Vegas (about a two-hour drive). Grand Canyon Village, on the other hand, is about a four-hour drive to Las Vegas and twice as far away. The tribe is keenly aware of this geographic advantage. They use their proximity to Las Vegas to promote Grand Canyon West as a similar, scenic rim-side view of the Grand Canyon and Colorado River as what is available at the NPS Grand Canyon Village. On the tribe’s website, the allure is clear: “Grand Canyon West has features you just won’t find at the South or North Rims. Get an aerial view of the Canyon through a glass bridge on the Skywalk, take a white-water rafting tour with Hualapai River Runners, take a helicopter & boat tour, soar over cliffs on a zip line, and explore the area’s history at the Native American

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JACK KURTZ / THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Which Grand Canyon is the **real** Grand Canyon?

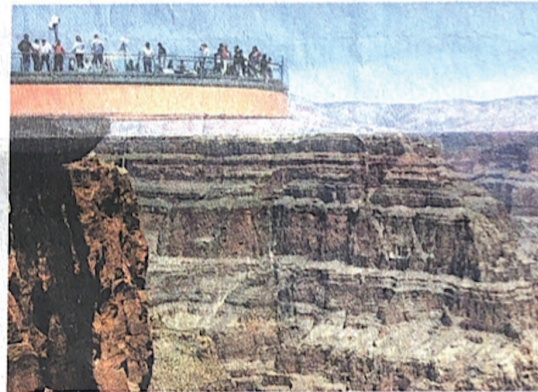
The South and North rims?

Or the west rim?



JOHN STANLEY / THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Visitors enjoy the patio overlooking the North Rim at Grand Canyon Lodge. Purists say the North and South rims offer the true and better canyon experience.



TOM TINGLE / THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Tourists enjoy the Skywalk. The Hualapai Tribe says its Grand Canyon West is less commercialized than amenities near the Grand Canyon National Park.

As popularity of Hualapai's Skywalk grows, so, too, does its rivalry with the national park

By Dawn Gilbertson
THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

LAS VEGAS — Clare Cornick and Pat Pascale boarded the Sweet-Tours charter bus from the Marriott Grand Chateau time-share just after sunrise, bound for their first peek into the Grand Canyon.

The childhood friends from New Jersey, now living on opposite coasts, opened their free breakfast

packs and settled in for the three-hour drive to Grand Canyon West, the isolated, internationally known home to the new glass Skywalk.

They picked it over Grand Canyon National Park because it was less than half the distance and put them back in Las Vegas before dark. The trip to the park would have meant three more hours on the road.

"I didn't want to mess with that," said Pascale, a retired educator.

Their rationale is marketing gold to the Native Americans behind Grand Canyon West and heresy to Canyon purists at the government-run park to the east, a fixture of family vacations and outdoor adventures for decades.

In the 14 months since the Skywalk opened and tripled visitor counts at 20-year-old Grand Canyon West, the rivalry and rhetoric between the "two" canyons has widened beyond the 250 miles that separate them.

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"Which Grand Canyon Is the Real Grand Canyon?" In this June 8, 2008, feature story the *Arizona Republic* explores differ perceptions of the Grand Canyon's identity and core location. Note the image on the left is from the North Rim near Grand Canyon Lodge and the image on the right features the Skywalk. The lower images titled "The South and North Rims?" and "Or the west rim?" pose a misleading juxtaposition, since both Grand Canyon Village and Grand Canyon West, the primary locations cited in the article as the two places in contention for the real Grand Canyon title, are on the South Rim of the canyon. Clipping from the author's collection.

Village and Guano Point” (Grand Canyon Resort Corporation 2023).

The Hualapai Tribe’s Grand Canyon West offers a familiar mixture of tourist activities including hiking, camping, and horseback tours along with more modernized adventures via helicopter or one-day whitewater trips on motorized rafts (Grand Canyon Resort Corporation 2023). In a relatively short time since 2007, the Hualapai developed opportunities for tourists to see the canyon from a variety of geographic viewpoints—from the rim, from the depths along the Colorado River, and even from the sky above on board a helicopter. What makes this canyon business venture stand out, however, is a clever and subtle reformulation of authenticity and place-based tourism. At Grand Canyon West, the Hualapai Tribe plays upon tourist expectations and desires for a “Wild West” experience of horseback riding, camping, “cowboy entertainment,” and campfire cookouts. At the same time, the tribe reclaims these activities and reappropriates them for the Grand Canyon West experience. Here tribal members can control the medium *and* the message. The website for the Hualapai Ranch at Grand Canyon West, for example, offers tourists a robust list of “ranch amenities” including:

Spend the Night [*sic*] at the Hualapai Ranch in our rustic cabins facing the Canyon Rim!
Hot lunches served at the Dancehall
Enjoy live entertainment while having your meal
Join the cowboys making S’mores and telling stories around an open fire in the evening.
Learn how to rope and quick draw during the day.
Enjoy western hospitality, cowboy entertainment, wagon rides and more.
Photo opportunities with Hualapai Members
A choice . . . of hot breakfasts
Gift Shop with western merchandise
Free Wi-fi

Note the inclusion of “photo opportunities with Hualapai Members” mixed in with the “western hospitality” and “cowboy entertainment.” These activities are not new to the canyon scene or to the tourism experiences in the American West, but they are an appropriation and reformulation of western tropes that reflect American Indian agency.

The history of American Indian land dispossession and removal often went hand in hand with American Indians as entertainment, tracing back to at least the nineteenth century and the creation of the national park system in the United States (Dilworth 2001; Jacoby 2001; Spence 1999; and Morehouse 1996). Cultural historian Leah Dilworth notes that Fred Harvey’s

“Indian Tours of the Southwest” “spectacle represented the Southwest as a peaceful and fully domesticated region. It was not the wild, manly cowboys-and-Indians West represented by Frederic Remington’s mounted Plains warriors” (2001, 152). The Santa Fe Railroad and Fred Harvey played key roles in the massive political, social, and cultural transformation of the American West that shifted these lands and the people who lived there toward a tourism economy driven by mobility, affluence, and the consumption of western landscapes and people as entertainment. This process also included a “classification” of tribes and a privileging of certain tribes over others (Rothman 1998, 70–71). Historian Hal Rothman wryly noted that to the “disadvantage of the peoples of the canyon region, the railroad and the Harvey Company engaged in a clear mythification process that mirrored their combined efforts elsewhere in the Southwest. This mythic southwestern overlay privileged Hopi and pueblo culture above Navajo, and Navajo above Havasupai, Yavapai, and Hualapai” (1998, 70). The Hualapai Ranch at Grand Canyon West engages this mythification head-on, by reappropriating the process and repositioning the tribe as an active participant in the creation of the tourism experience in the Grand Canyon without SFRR’s and Fred Harvey’s imposed privileging of other tribes above theirs.

At Grand Canyon West, Hualapai tribal members play the role of cowboys, who entertain tourists during the day with roping and quick drawing and by night by making S’mores and “telling stories.” As the website says, a visitor’s “adventure on the West Rim of the Grand Canyon” at Hualapai Ranch “provides western flavor with many cowboy activities that can be enjoyed by all. There is a dining hall where you will be able to enjoy western type cuisine and watch our entertainers during your meal.” All this for the price of a Hualapai Legacy ticket that is required for all visitors to the Hualapai Ranch. This all-inclusive ranch provides rustic comfort and western flavor that fulfills tourists’ cravings for that mythical Wild West of the Grand Canyon but shaped by the Hualapai tribal narrative instead of by the Santa Fe Railroad’s or Fred Harvey’s. For example, at the west rim, visitors can learn about the Hualapai traditions through storytelling, song, dance, and regalia as performed by the Hualapai Bird Singers or take a self-guided tour of a Native American village set up with interpretation provided by the tribe, or join a Smooth Float Tour on the Colorado River run by Native guides of the Hualapai River Runners. The tribe also offers programs, classes, and public education at the Hualapai Cultural Center in Peach Springs, Arizona.

The Hualapai’s appeal for their version of the real Grand Canyon also rests heavily on the visual appeal

of the canyon and a specific series of colors to portray the canyon, perhaps following the historic visual arc formulated and replicated in postcards and photographs. “Yellow, blue, pink, red, and purple: these are the colors of the Grand Canyon. Get a taste of the Old West and strengthen your relationship with nature on horseback.” Here horseback rides down into the canyon—just as we’ve seen in many images of the canyon from Detroit

Publishing Company to Curt Teich to Frasher Foto—is also still a staple of the “real” canyon experience.

The centerpiece of Grand Canyon West is Skywalk, a glass bridge that juts out of the canyon’s walls while suspending tourists four thousand feet above the canyon’s depths with dramatic views of the Colorado River below (figure, this page). In a June 8, 2008, article in the *Arizona*

Grand Canyon West Skywalk at the Hualapai Indian Reservation. Grand Canyon Resort Corporation, <https://grandcanyonwest.com/explore/west-rim/>.

GRAND CANYON

West

Explore

EVEN MORE AT THE WEST RIM



Republic, Dawn Gilbertson reported that many visitors to Grand Canyon National Park “mistakenly believe” the Skywalk is located at a National Park Service–managed site. When they realize their mistake, they are 250 miles from their destination. The National Park Service has taken to posting flyers on the windows of entrance fee stations to the park that advise visitors that the Skywalk is “not here” with directions to turn around and drive west for a few hours to reach that location.

The Skywalk is a somewhat recent and controversial addition to Grand Canyon’s cultural landscape. Completed in 2007, its construction dismayed some Grand Canyon National Park fans who protested the development along the canyon’s walls and its safety. Some visitors loyal to the national park found different reasons to object to the glass bridge. A woman quoted in the *Arizona Republic* article expressed her concern for visitors who chose the Skywalk: “They won’t ever know that’s not the real Grand Canyon.” The article cites that “purists” such as this woman “say the North and South rims offer the true and better canyon experience”; while the Hualapai contend that the Skywalk, offers less development than its national park rival. In the article critics, noting the proximity of Grand Canyon West to Las Vegas, call the Hualapai visitor center “Grand Canyon lite or Vegas-style.”

The Grand Canyon debate involves a number of issues. The National Park Service rim locations have been a center of Grand Canyon visitation since the turn of the twentieth century. Tourists rarely visit the Hualapai site; instead, it is relegated to the periphery of conventional tour operators. Access to the park service site is along paved highways and well-marked regional road connections; the entrance to the Hualapai site was along fourteen miles of dirt road until, in 2014, the entire roadway was finally paved. At the center of this debate is a contest over how we frame nature. These developments offer the chance to experience a visual-cultural landscape steeped in different histories, cultures, and political contexts. When exploring the visual-cultural Grand Canyon, there is more than one real Grand Canyon.

National park landscapes are produced through complex social, cultural, and economic interactions between the National Park Service, concessionaires, park visitors, and interest groups. As each of these groups endeavors to exert a specific identity upon a certain landscape, a complex and interwoven process is set in motion and guided by an ever-shifting agenda of negotiation, contestation, and revision. Cultural landscapes in national parks are not static landscapes confined to their material elements; instead they are dynamic places better understood as mediums through which multiple representations, practices, and performances of power,

wielded by individuals and stakeholders, stream through an ongoing project to create and constrict how the material landscape looks and functions.

The Grand Canyon authenticity disputes are rooted in a larger question: where is the real American West? Geographer Donald Meinig notes that the West “is a powerful symbol within the national mythology, but as soon as we attempt to connect symbol with substance, to assess the relationships between the West as Place in the imagination and the West as a piece of the American continent, we are confronted with great variation from place to place” (qtd. in Hausladen 2003, 19). Indeed, this study’s review of visual representations of the Grand Canyon supports Meinig’s claim. There is a great deal of variation from place to place in the Grand Canyon.

But where is the *real* Grand Canyon? From this research and review of visual representations in popular media, one thing seems clear: there are many Grand Canyons. It can be a rim-side scenic overlook. It can be a mule ride down a steep trail into the canyon’s depths. It can be a pulse-quickenning ride down a rapid full of cold, clear Colorado River water. There are many variations and iterations. I have explored several factors that shape place imagery of the Grand Canyon in popular media; but visual representations of the Grand Canyon in popular media are often a primary source of information for visitors to the canyon, and their imaginations have, no doubt, been shaped by images in magazines, newspapers, and films, and on postcards and websites.

Finding the real Grand Canyon is a question of vertical as well as horizontal locations. For John Wesley Powell and his crew, the Grand Canyon was an inner canyon experience, a place defined by towering rock walls, dangerous rapids, and long days spent wondering what was around the next bend. Powell’s words focused on the Colorado River corridor and the landscapes he encountered. Clarence Dutton’s view from the rim, on the other hand, established a spatial discipline for understanding the canyon not from the river but from the overlooks. “With few exceptions, those who came to the Canyon saw it, as Dutton did, from the rim” (Pyne 1998, 71). Turn-of-the-twentieth-century tourists knew the canyon from the rim and inner canyon trails, visiting the South and North Rim scenic viewpoints and taking mule rides into the canyon after jostling along dirt wagon roads to reach their destination. Auto tourists also visited the canyon’s rim-side viewpoints. River rafters and inner canyon hikers came to know the canyon from the river up instead of the rim down. Editors, photographers, and postcard manufacturers shaped popular perceptions of these areas by created visual representations of the

landscapes and locations. Visual representations of material landscapes are “not just innocent documents of the built environment”; instead they are “constructed images of constructed places” that convey the cultural ideals and changing values of the society that creates and propagates these images (Schein 1993, 8).

Finding the real Grand Canyon is a task laden with hard political and environmental realities. The Grand Canyon has undergone a tremendous cultural metamorphosis from a place once known as an “altogether value less” location (Ives 1861, 110) to a national park that attracts over four million visitors a year. It is a story that weaves together many miles, many people, and many canyons. It is a story that traces what may be seen and what may be read. Visual representations of the Grand Canyon are embedded in social, cultural, economic, and political discussions that change over time. The Grand Canyon encompasses an area of immense environmental diversity within the Colorado Plateau. Although much of the development and popular imagery of the canyon focused on rims, inner canyon, or

river locations, the forested lands that stretch beyond the rims were also fought over locations.

A 2009 newspaper article in the *Northern Arizona News* described the reintroduction of a Grand Canyon bill that sought to protect some of the canyon’s environment from uranium mining. The initiator of that bill invoked the canyon’s enduring power: “It is the icon of our National Park System and our forest, and as such has a different status in the history of public lands and the value of public lands.” The congressman continued: “We’re making a distinction, and maybe it’s an unfair distinction to other areas, but at some point you need to draw a line in the sand.” Visual representations of the canyon are not innocent documents but are instead value-laden materials crafted by a network of promoters, managers, users, and others over time. The Grand Canyon is fought over, and the best viewing spots are in competition because there is a substantial cultural inheritance at the Grand Canyon. As the canyon shifted from idea to fact to symbol, it gained in cultural significance and environmental protection.

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