

U.S.

Martin Litton, Fighter for Environment, Dies at 97

By PAUL VITELLO DEC. 6, 2014

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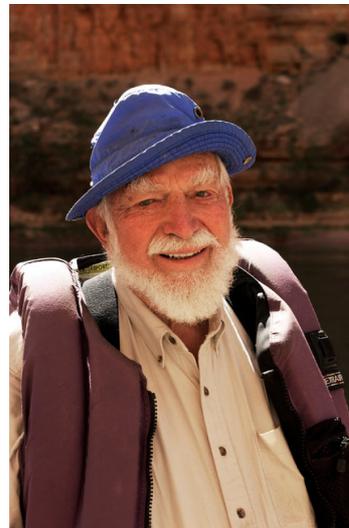
Martin Litton, an environmentalist, river pilot, writer and unrelenting forward scout in the battle to preserve what was left of the wilderness in the American West, most notably the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River, died on Nov. 30 at his home in Portola Valley, Calif. He was 97.

His death was announced by the [Sierra Club](#), which he had served as a director.

During his 70 years on the front lines of the American environmental movement, Mr. Litton was less known than other figures. His open disdain for the compromise and consensus-building paths that were often taken by the movement's leaders (disastrously, in his view) seemed to relegate him to a different role.

He was the movement's Jeremiah — the crier in the wilderness who spotted the threats, condemned the desecraters and rallied the leadership to the defining preservation conflicts of the early 1950s through the '80s.

[David Brower](#), who as the [Sierra Club](#)'s seminal leader in the last half of the 20th century was compelled to make some of the compromises Mr. Litton fought, was known to call him "our conscience."



Martin Litton at the Grand Canyon in 2004. He helped save the canyon, which he traversed many times as a river guide, from a plan to bookend it with dams in the 1960s.

John Blaustein/Sequoia ForestKeeper, via Associated Press

Mr. Litton's intransigence was often the first line of defense not only against timber and mining interests, for example, but against a broad postwar public perception that all massive public works projects — roads, bridges and dams — were, by definition, good. He tried to change that view early on as a photojournalist.

In the early 1950s he rallied environmentalists, including Mr. Brower, to fight a planned highway through the Sequoia and Inyo National Forests in California's Sierra Nevada. At one point he flew Mr. Brower and a newspaper photographer over the site in his small plane to publicize the potential harm the road posed to some of the world's oldest and tallest trees.

He wrote a series of articles for The Los Angeles Times later in the decade that raised the first wide-scale alarm about government plans to build a dam that would flood parts of the [Dinosaur National Monument](#), at the border of Colorado and Utah, for a [hydroelectric](#) plant.

And when the Interior Department announced plans in 1963 to bookend the Grand Canyon with a pair of dams across the Colorado River — a federal official claimed that by filling a part the canyon with water, more people than ever would see its walls from boats — Mr. Litton wrote a trenchant but truculent essay for the Sierra Club Bulletin that set off one of the most important wilderness fights in the history of the national parks.

"Shall we fail to go into battle because it is hard to win?" he wrote. "Could not 22,000 Sierra Club members, without strain, turn out 22,000 letters a day for a week?"

He continued, "There has never been a Congress, a president, a secretary of interior, a governor or a newspaper editor who would not sit up and take notice of that."

The essay was accompanied by a list of the names and addresses of every officeholder it mentioned, prompting the Internal Revenue Service to suspend the Sierra Club's tax-exempt status for breaking rules against political lobbying.

But the fight for the Grand Canyon galvanized activists and won wide public support. Taking a cue from Mr. Litton, who joined the board in 1964, the Sierra Club attacked the government plan with full-page ads in The New York Times and The Washington Post. One was headlined: "Should We Also Flood the Sistine Chapel So Tourists Can Get Nearer the Ceiling?"

The government scrapped the plan in

1968. By then, Sierra Club membership had grown to 78,000. Mr. Litton left its board in 1972.

“People always tell me not to be extreme,” he said in a 2010 documentary about his life, [“The Good Fight.”](#)

“‘Be reasonable!’ they say. But I never felt it did any good to be reasonable about anything in conservation, because what you give away will never come back — ever. When it comes to saving wilderness, we can’t be extreme enough. To compromise is to lose.”

Clyde Martin Litton was born on Feb. 13, 1917, in Los Angeles, the son of Clyde and Elsie Litton. His father was a veterinarian, and his mother worked in the home raising their four children.

Mr. Litton earned a bachelor’s degree in English at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1939. During [World War II](#), he flew glider planes in the Army Air Forces, transporting troops and equipment behind enemy lines during the European invasion. He became a freelance writer and photographer after the war and was drawn increasingly to environmental subjects.

Mr. Litton is survived by his wife of 72 years, the former Esther Clewette; their sons John and Donald; their daughters Kathleen Litton and Helen Litton; five grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

From 1971 to 1988, Mr. Litton ran a company operating trips through the canyon in flat-bottomed boats called river dories.

Despite his accomplishments, Mr. Litton would speak more of his disappointments when interviewed late in life. And the one that seemed to haunt him most resulted from a compromise.

In exchange for the government’s promise to scrap its planned Dinosaur National Monument dam, the Sierra Club and other environmental groups had agreed in the 1950s not to oppose construction of a dam at Glen Canyon, about 15 miles upriver from the eastern end of Grand Canyon National Park.

Since the late 1960s the dam has provided much of the power and water used in the Southwest. Mr. Litton spent many years involved in an unsuccessful campaign to dismantle the dam, saying it had caused environmental problems downstream, including salinization of the water and a proliferation of invasive plants and animals that threatened native species.

The failure to stop the dam tormented him, he often said, though in a 1997 interview with The Los Angeles Times he said: “Between you and

me, I'm not too worried about this canyon. In 100,000 years, there will be no evidence we were here. It will all be washed away.

“What I'm worried about is life. And those things we're doing to extinguish life.”

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