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## Amid Dry Times in the West, a Lake Raises Spirits

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PAGE, Ariz. — The story of water in the West is largely one of boom and bust, and lately, during a persistent drought, it was mainly bust. But now and then the rains and snow come, the streams and rivers gush, the huge lake here expands and the rhapsody of the rise commences.

“The red sands, the cliffs,” said Bill Floor as he readied his boat for a jaunt through a channel not open in years because receding waters left it dry. “Lake Powell has its own special spirit.”

Such excitement abounds in this summer of bountiful water, at least on the lake. That is right: in a drought, Lake Powell, unexpectedly and improbably, has risen to its highest point in six years, in the biggest increase since the dry period began in the fall of 1999.

Euphoric locals organized a contest to guess the precise time when the waters, swelled by higher than normal mountain snows this past winter, would fill Castle Rock Cut, the channel through which Mr. Floor prepared to pass.

Boaters who had stayed away are flocking back. Hotels are full and booked a month in advance, although it is difficult to discern how much of that is because of the lake or the surge of European tourists — “they love the heat and Westerns and anything having to do with cowboys and Indians,” one merchant said — taking advantage of the weak dollar.

Water managers are watching for signs of a long-term letup in the drought. For now, caution rules the day.

“The nature of the beast is we don’t know if we are in or out of a drought until a couple of years go by because we are talking about long-term trends,” said Barry Wirth, a spokesman for the Bureau of Reclamation, the federal agency that manages the system of dams and reservoirs on the Colorado River that provides water for 25 million people in seven states, and includes Lake Powell.

“We could have a good year in the midst of bad years,” he said. “We just don’t know.”

The lake, which is the second-largest artificial reservoir in the country behind its downstream sister, Lake Mead near Las Vegas, is nearly two-thirds full, a remarkable turnabout from the low it hit in the spring of 2005 when it was about one-third full.

Lake Powell sits behind Glen Canyon Dam, completed in 1963 near where the Grand Canyon begins, and stretches 186 miles along the Colorado River path, largely in the Utah high desert.

Fed by the Colorado River and tributaries, it stores water for several states as a sort of insurance policy against lean years. The drought had shrunk the lake to about 33 percent full in 2005, the lowest point since it began filling in 1963, from 95 percent of capacity in 1999.

The defining image of the lake then was the “bathtub ring” of minerals left behind on its cliffs and rocky walls as the water dropped. Boat launches were left unusable or had to be extended to chase the receding water.

Many boaters abandoned the lake, in part because the closure of Castle Rock Cut had forced boats to take a more turbulent, circuitous route to the inner lake.

“The Maytag straits, as in the washing machines, is what people call it,” said Steve Ward, the director of public relations at Lake Powell Marina and Resort and a boater for 40 years.

The ring is still there and the water has not restored all of the launches, but at a time of high fuel costs, the opening of Castle Rock Cut is significant. It eliminates an hour or two from the trip up the lake.

“We probably would not have come this year if it wasn’t open,” Mr. Floor said. He paused for a moment and returned to reality.

“Well, maybe we would have anyway, but it would have been more painful,” he said, noting that gas alone cost about \$1,600 for four or five days on the lake.

Tom Rohn of Carefree, Ariz., and a friend, Wayne Campbell of Bellevue, Wash., found that the higher water allowed them to go deeper into the many inlets and canyons that rim the lake.

“We saw places we probably haven’t seen for many years,” Mr. Campbell said.

People new to the lake probably will not understand the excitement. Even at its low point it was still immense, its aqua-blue water a contrast to the jagged red and beige rocks around it.

“We came because it is in the desert and we do not see this in Italy,” said Federico Ventura of Milan, here with his family. “We did not know about the water. To me it is just a beautiful lake.”

Mr. Wirth said the lake level was dropping now that the mountain runoff had largely subsided, but officials project it will remain high enough to keep the Castle Rock Cut open until next year. Because of the way the Colorado River is managed, Lake Mead remains low, although the strong runoff and new rules to regulate the lakes put in place last December mean that it will not drop as much as projected last fall.

Whether a consequence of the lake or the strong performance of the euro, the surge in visitors has led to a welcome problem for this town of about 7,000 that, apart from government work and a nearby power plant, relies on tourism for its economy.

“We can’t find a room anywhere,” said Vin Paitoon, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce in this town, the commercial center for the lake.

But like a fleeting summer romance, long-timers understand that the lake most likely will drop again. The

goal is to take advantage of nature's bonus.

"We definitely come here more when the water is up," said Mark Tomlinson of Phoenix, ending a seven-day trip on the lake. "But even down, it's not like there isn't enough water for the boat."

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