



“Roads Less
Traveled”

RIVERSIDE STORIES

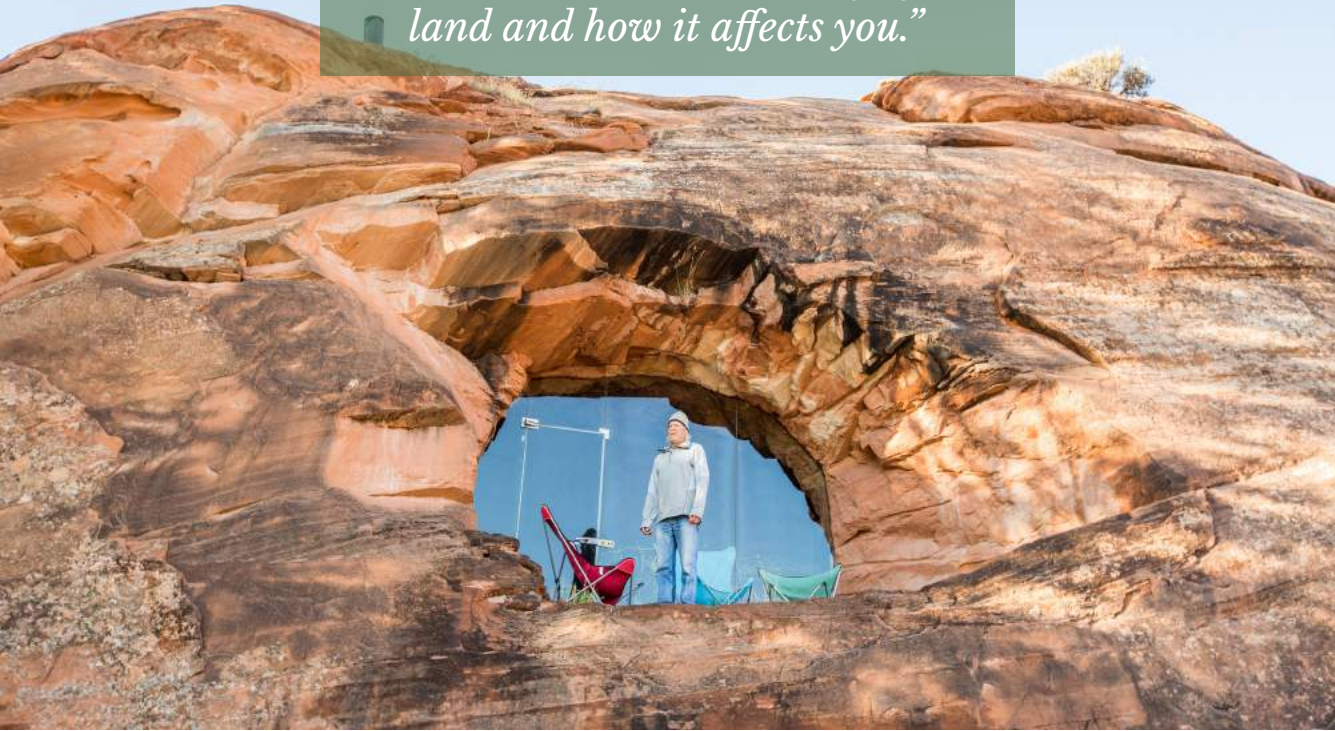
GRANT JOHNSON

Landowner on Escalante River, UT

AFTER GRANT JOHNSON left high school in Wisconsin in 1973 at the age of 17, he very quickly found himself in southwest Utah, enamored with its natural beauty. Since then, he’s been living off the land, always with an eye to adventure on the roads less traveled - or rather, the places without any roads at all.

It only seems fitting that you’d find yourself driving down a riverbed, not a road, in order to reach his stunning home nestled into a slickrock butte seven miles from the small town of Boulder, Utah. Using techniques acquired during his time as a hardrock miner, Grant blasted out over 3,000 square feet of rock in order to clear way for home construction inside the butte. In a labor of love, he and his family artfully constructed an incredibly unique, self-sustaining and elegant home, complete with solar panels, chimneys, and even an internal bridge between the main room and an adjoining section of the house.

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For almost three decades, Grant and his family have been homesteading 40-acres, growing just about everything under the sun. “We produce food here,” he chuckles. “Right now we’re putting up Italian sauce, salsa, peaches, hot pickled peppers, and all sorts of other peppers.” In addition, Grant’s farm is home to livestock, including cows and turkeys, as well as a dog and quite a few horses. In fact, these horses are integral members to his family, as Grant also spends much of his time as a horse packer, loading hundreds of pounds of material goods and supplies onto a string of horses and leading them through the wilderness. “The horses are sort of like a truck for the backcountry,” he laughs.

Their destination is the remote riverbanks of the Escalante River, where he meets up with youth conservation corps crews employed by the Escalante River Watershed Partnership (ERWP), a multi-stakeholder group working to restore and maintain

the natural ecological conditions of the Escalante River and its watershed. The crews, an integral component of the ERWP, are hard at work removing Russian olive, an invasive plant that has taken over much of the riparian (riverside) ecosystem in this region. For these crews, which camp out for several weeks on end, Grant serves as a lifeline for supplies and is a welcome sight after days of sawing away at what can seem like an endless wall of Russian olive.

Prior to supplying the conservation corps crews, Grant and his wife, Sue, owned and operated Escalante Canyon Outfitters for over two decades. Their company ran 20 trips a year and provided visitors an opportunity to explore the majesties of the Escalante River, the place that he happily calls home. “For me, it’s about the beauty and the land,” he explains, “and how it affects you.” For most of the years that he ran these trips down the river, Grant was happy to find little to no human impact. “We

wouldn’t even see footprints,” he said. “The backcountry was really just not visited.”

Nor was the backcountry impacted by Russian olive – until recently. Grant’s extensive experience on the Escalante River provided him perspective on how drastically the riparian zones were being harmed by the spread of Russian olive over the last few decades. The sites that Grant often used to access the river were now thicketed with Russian olive; he cataloged the changes in the shape and slope of the riverbanks, and noticed how native plants, upon which



diverse wildlife rely, were being outcompeted by this aggressive tree.

“The Russian olives just completely changed things through the end of the 90s and after the turn of the century,” he explains. “On the other side of where my camp is, there is just a wall of Russian olive. It wasn’t that way a few years ago. They eventually kill off everything else, and take over the whole canyon bottom.”

After witnessing the changes happening in the ecosystem, Grant took action; he rallied with others that were also concerned about the negative impacts of Russian olive and was instrumental in the formation of ERWP in 2009. Grant knows that restoration of the Escalante River is no small feat, but he recognizes the impact that information can have, and wants everyone to know just how valuable the efforts to repair the riparian area are. “Society has eaten its way through the whole planet, and there aren’t many wild places left; it’s so vital to protect.” ■

Photography Credit: Zach Mahone

This is part of the Riverside Stories series, brought to you by the Tamarisk Coalition in partnership with the Escalante River Watershed Partnership, and funded by the Walton Family Foundation.

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