

# Out Here, No One Can Hear You Scream

The dangerous culture of male entitlement and sexual hostility hiding within America's national parks and forests.

**STORY KATHRYN JOYCE**

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On an early Friday morning in late June 2006, Cheyenne Szydlo, a 33-year-old Arizona wildlife biologist with fiery red hair, drove to the Grand Canyon's South Rim to meet the river guide who would be taking her along the 280 miles of the Colorado River that coursed a mile below. She was excited. Everyone in her field wanted to work at the Grand Canyon, and after several years of unsuccessful applications, Szydlo had recently been offered a seasonal position in one of the National Park Service's science divisions. She'd quit another job in order to accept, certain her chance wouldn't come again.

The Grand Canyon is a mecca of biological diversity, home to species that grow nowhere else on earth. But after a dam was built upstream 60 years ago, changes in the Colorado's flow have enabled the rise of invasive species and displaced numerous forms of wildlife. Szydlo's task was to hunt for the Southwestern willow flycatcher, a tiny endangered songbird that historically had nested on the river but hadn't been seen in three years. Her supervisor believed the bird was locally extinct, but Szydlo was determined to find it. The June expedition—a nine-day journey through the canyon on a 20-foot motorboat operated by a boatman named Dave Loeffler—would be her last chance that summer. When Szydlo asked a coworker what Loeffler was like, the reply was cryptic: “You’ll see.” Szydlo, who'd studied marine biology in Australia and coral reefs in French Polynesia, was drawn to the adventurous nature of the work. “From my earliest memories,” she told me, “there was never any place that felt safer or happier to me than the outdoors.” On the morning of the trip, she arrived at the boat shop early. She assumed they'd leave at once, to make the most of the day. Instead, she said, Loeffler took her to a coworker's house, and for an hour and a half, she sat uncomfortably as Loeffler told his friend about the battery-powered blender he'd packed to make “the best margaritas on the river.”

They set out from Lees Ferry in Marble Canyon, the otherworldly antechamber to “the Grand.” From there, the river winds through towering, striated red cliffs and balancing rock formations, under the Navajo Bridge, and, at around mile 60, into the Grand Canyon itself. The views are stupefying, the waters turquoise, and the disconnection almost total—a moonscape beyond cell phone reception. For many people, it's a spiritual experience.

It's also an intimate one. Travelers eat and sleep together, and, due to the lack of cover, must often bathe and go to the bathroom in full view, using portable metal ammo cans outfitted with toilet seats. Commercial river guides often say that no one can claim their privacy on the river, so fellow passengers should offer it instead.

In Szydlo's recounting of the trip, Loeffler didn't adhere to this code. When she bent to move provisions or tie up the boat, he commented on a logo on the back of her utility skirt. He asked frank questions about her sex life and referred to Szydlo as "hot sexy biologist." That June, the temperatures at the bottom of the canyon reached 109 degrees, and when Szydlo scorched her skin on a metal storage box, Loeffler said she had a hot ass. He adjusted her bra strap when it slipped and, one chilly night, invited her to sleep in the boat with him if she was cold. When they stopped to take a picture at a particularly scenic spot, he suggested that she pose naked. He told her that another female Park Services staffer would be hiking in to meet them at the halfway point, and that he hoped they would have "a three-way." Szydlo told me she laughed uncomfortably and spoke often of her boyfriend and their plans to get married.

By the third day of the trip, it seemed to Szydlo that Loeffler was getting increasingly frustrated. They stopped at a confluence where the Colorado meets a tributary and forms a short tumble of rapids gentle enough for boaters to swim through with a life jacket. Szydlo pulled on her preserver, but Loeffler insisted she didn't need one. When she entered the river without it, the water sucked her under. She somersaulted through the rapids "like I was in a washing machine," she recalled. She thought she was going to drown. Then the rapids spat her out into a calm, shallow pool. She came up gasping and choking to the sound of Loeffler's laughter, and thought to herself, "I'm in deep shit."

We're used to hearing stories of sexual harassment in the Army, the Navy, or within the police force; 25 years after the Tailhook scandal, when scores of Marine and Naval officers allegedly sexually assaulted some 83 women and seven men at a military convention, there's a general cultural understanding of what women face in traditionally male-dominated public institutions. The agencies that protect America's natural heritage enjoy a

reputation for a certain benign progressivism—but some of them have their own troubling history of hostility toward women.

In 2012 in Texas, members of the Parks and Wildlife Department complained about a “legacy” of racial and gender intolerance; only 8 percent of the state's 500 game wardens were women. In 2014, in California, female employees of the U.S. Forest Service filed a class-action lawsuit—the fourth in 35 years—over what they described as an egregious, long-standing culture of sexual harassment, disparity in hiring and promotion, and retaliation against those who complained. (That lawsuit is still pending.) And this January, the Department of the Interior’s Office of Inspector General announced that it had “found evidence of a long-term pattern of sexual harassment and hostile work environment” in the Grand Canyon’s River District, a part of the Park Service.

Ever since the U.S. created institutions to protect its wilderness, those agencies have been bound up with a particular image of masculinity. The first park rangers in the U.S. were former cavalrymen, assigned to protect preserves like Yellowstone and Yosemite from poachers and fire. The public quickly became enamored by these rugged, solitary figures. In the early 1900s, as the Park Service was created, a new breed emerged: naturalists who endeavored to teach the public the principles of conservation. As the historian Polly Welts Kaufman has written, the earlier generation of rangers resented the intrusion of “pansy-pickers” and “butterfly chasers.” Also controversial was the presence of a small number of women at the agency. Male naturalists worried that their job would be seen as effeminate, instead of, as one put it, “the embodiment of Kit Carson, Daniel Boone, the Texas Rangers, and General Pershing.” In the 1930s and ‘40s the ranks were mostly filled by returning veterans attracted by the ranger corps’ quasi-military culture. Until 1978, female rangers weren’t permitted to wear the same uniform or even the same badge as the men, but instead wore skirts modeled on stewardesses’ uniforms.



Park ranger or Pan Am stewardess? (National Park Service)



Enid Michael, a park ranger in the 1920s, overdressed for her dance with a bear. (National Park Service.)

The other major institution tasked with preserving and managing the American wilderness, the Forest Service, developed on a similar trajectory. Although the Forest Service comes under the direction of the Department of Agriculture (while the Park Service falls under the DOI), its employees

perform similar work and its culture is also modeled along military lines. By the 1970s, women held only 2 percent of full-time professional roles in the service nationwide. In California—whose lands are the crown jewel of the national forest system— female employees filed a class-action lawsuit known as *Bernardi v. Madigan*. The case was settled in 1981 with a court-enforced “consent decree” that required the Forest Service’s California region to employ as many women as the civilian workforce—at least 43 percent in every pay grade. The decision ultimately saw hundreds of “Bernardi women” enter the service, to the disgruntlement of many male employees.

Lesa Donnelly is a former Forest Service administrator who worked for the agency from 1978 to 2002. In 1994, she filed a complaint charging that three of her male colleagues were harassing her. After word spread (incorrectly) that she planned to file a class-action lawsuit, she received dozens of calls. She heard from women who claimed they were being threatened with physical and sexual assault, and women who said they’d been punished for making complaints. One said the men on her crew joked about raping her in her sleep and had tied her blood-stained underwear to the antenna of their fire truck. Two women told her that a notice in their office about the Bernardi consent decree had been defaced with a scrawled reference to the “cuntsent decree.” She realized her own complaint was “nothing compared to what I found out was happening.”

Eventually, Donnelly compiled claims from 50 women, and in 1995 she filed a class-action suit against the Forest Service, including declarations from many of the woman who had reached out to her. The agency negotiated a settlement that allowed for continued court oversight of California’s Forest Service. But when the monitoring period ended in 2006, the old problems soon resurfaced, as Donnelly would describe in testimony to Congress two years later. One dispatcher reported that she’d been sexually assaulted and stalked by a manager. He was made to resign, but after six months the Forest Service tried to work with him again. In 2008, a male supervisor at the same forest said that he hated a black female employee and wanted to shoot subordinates he hated. When the employee reported the comment, the district ranger told her to ignore him.

This year, I met Donnelly, who is 58, in El Dorado Hills, outside Sacramento. Now the vice president of the USDA Coalition of Minority Employees, a civil rights group, she has the demeanor of a friendly bulldog. She told me that nearly every year for the last 15 years, she has traveled to

Washington, D.C., to lobby the USDA, Congress, and the White House to protect women in the service. She managed to enlist the help of representatives Jackie Speier of California, Peter DeFazio of Oregon and Raúl Grijalva of Arizona, who in 2014 petitioned the USDA to investigate, without success. Each time Donnelly comes to D.C., she added, she brings details of 20 to 25 new allegations. But while her fight against the Forest Service has persisted for more than two decades, in the Grand Canyon, similar questions about the treatment of women have only started to surface.

“On the river, the boatman is god,” Cheyenne Szydlo told me. In the Grand Canyon, river guides enjoy an almost exalted status, revered for their ability to “read water.” Boatmen have almost total responsibility for their passengers—they keep the food and determine when and where to sleep, explore, or go to the bathroom. They also control the satellite phone, the only means of contact with the outside world. But within the Park Service, boatmen were more important still. Men like Dave Loeffler guided visiting officials or VIPs on adventures within the canyon, undertook rescue missions, and were featured in travel stories in newspapers and magazines. They “made it seem [to park management] like the river was the surface of Mars,” one boatman for a private company recalled. The administration saw them as irreplaceable.

In the early 2000s, three men turned the boat shop into a small fiefdom. There were the “two Daves”—Loeffler and his supervisor, Dave Desrosiers—and Bryan Edwards, the boat shop manager. In addition to this small core of permanent staffers, the park periodically hired intermittent boatmen. One, Dan Hall, worked in the canyon during this period and was friendly with the trio. Hall is garrulous and not remotely prudish. “I have offended people I’ve worked with,” he told me. “I do my best to apologize and not let it happen again .... But with the Daves, it had this very dark side to it.” He remembered the three talking about who could sleep with the most women on the river. “They were always on the make,” he said. In a written response sent via Facebook, Edwards said that “no competition ever existed.”

Rafting on the Colorado has always had a bit of a party vibe, and that attitude held for Park Service trips, too. Boats sometimes carried a large

quantity of alcohol. Participants sometimes hooked up. But during the early 2000s, Hall told me, it seemed short-lived river affairs were almost expected of female employees. According to one former employee, veteran female staffers warned new hires to make sure they set up tents with a friend rather than sleeping on the boats, as the boatmen usually did. Sometimes, Hall said, boatmen would lobby supervisors to send women from completely unrelated park divisions—an attractive new hire at the entry booth, for instance—on trips. Often, though, the targets were from science divisions that required river access, such as vegetation and wildlife.

The field leader of the vegetation program from 2002 to 2005, Kate Watters, said that she complained to her supervisor about the boatmen's behavior. In October 2005, an expedition was planned to see if the two groups could overcome their difficulties. The trip was led by Bryan Edwards. Participants included Watters, who was married to Dan Hall at the time, and her new intern, a biologist I'll call Anne.

**“I did flash a camera below her skirt as she stood next to me,” Edwards said. “It was intended for shock value only.”**

The expedition coincided with Halloween week, and one night most of the participants put on costumes. Many were drinking. Anne—dressed as a butterfly, in wings and a dress—was in the camp's kitchen area, when Edwards—dressed as a pirate—came up behind her. He grabbed the camera she'd left on the table. “The next thing I knew, his hand was between my legs,” she said. Then Edwards shot a picture up her skirt.

Watters observed aloud that Edwards' behavior was unacceptable. Loeffler, who was attired as “a hillbilly axe murderer” and carrying a real axe, demanded that Watters talk it out with Edwards instead of filing a report. She recalled that he bellowed at her, axe in hand, “Fuck you, Kate Watters. You can't have control over people's jobs.” Loeffler told me that he was unable to answer questions since he is still a park employee. Edwards wrote in his response, “I did flash a camera below her skirt as she stood next to me. It was intended for shock value only” as Anne had been drinking, he explained.

Watters said that in a meeting after her return with Edwards and Desrosiers' boss, Edwards glared at her and cleaned his nails with a 6-inch buck knife. (Edwards called this description "entirely false.") In 2006, he received a 30-day suspension over the incident, after which he resigned. Edwards confirmed this to me, but wrote in another message, "I suspect nearly everything you have been told is at least either 'misrepresentation' or outright lie." He felt that he had done "a lot of good in my 12 yrs in Grand Canyon," he went on. "Because of my abilities, I did things people dreamed about doing but simply could not on that River and dealt with their envy and accusations constantly." Edwards added, "But as the joke goes: ' ... ach, you fuck one sheep!'"

Following Edwards' resignation, relations between the boat shop and vegetation devolved into a cold war. On trips, according to multiple sources, some of the boatmen withheld food or avoided taking volunteers to work sites. Watters complained to the director of the science division and to regional Park Service authorities. After getting nowhere, she quit in frustration and Anne eventually assumed her place. According to Anne and Hall, Loeffler later showed up at a campsite where Anne was working to harangue her about Edwards. He and Desrosiers made it so difficult for her to schedule trips that sometimes she had to use a helicopter, at great expense. These acts of sabotage "became an art form for the two Daves," recalled Hall. The pair even erected a memorial to Edwards in the boat shop, said two former employees: a crude bust of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns with Edwards' name written on the base in Sharpie. The implication was clear: Edwards had been martyred.

It was around the time of Edwards' departure that Szydlo took her boat trip with Loeffler. After the scare in the rapids, she said, the uneasy balance between them shifted. Szydlo stopped laughing at his come-ons. Loeffler would sleep in late and then tell her they didn't have time to visit her next work site. "This person was in complete control of everything I needed to survive," she said. "I was terrified." She began to formulate a plan to get out of the canyon if she needed to. "Even if there were trails to take, which in most places there were not, they'd land me in the middle of nowhere, in the desert, up on the rim," she said. "I didn't have enough food or water to attempt that." She could try to hike out on the Bright Angel Trail when they

reached the halfway point at Phantom Ranch. But doing so would mean missing the nesting sites on the lower half of the river—and, she feared, abandoning any hope of being hired back next season.

Cheyenne Szydlo.

The day before they reached Phantom Ranch, Szydlo said she felt as if some kind of assault was inevitable. Loeffler slowed the motorboat to a crawl, stopping at nearly every beach. Finally, in the middle of a channel, she heard the motor go quiet. Loeffler came up behind her, grabbed her shoulders and asked her to describe her sexual fantasies so he could act them out.

“I broke down crying,” Szydlo said. “Saying, ‘Get off me, stop harassing me.’ As soon as I used the word ‘harassment,’ he was like, ‘Whoa, stop. I don’t know what you’re talking about.’” He revved the engine and sped to Phantom Ranch. For the last five days, she said, they barely spoke, and at meals, Loeffler gave her minuscule portions. After she returned, she emailed her then-boyfriend and told him what had happened. Szydlo worried for months about whether she should file a report.

When she finally contacted an HR representative almost six months later, she said, she received a brief response informing her she’d need dates, times and witnesses in order to pursue a complaint. She let it drop, not wanting to start a “huge, ugly fight.” Much as she suspected, other women in similar situations have discovered that taking formal action can bring on its own host of problems.

The Eldorado National Forest is a mountainous expanse of nearly 1,000 square miles that stretches from east of Sacramento to the crest of the Sierra Nevada. Denice Rice has worked here for 15 years as a firefighter—on engines and fire crews and as a prevention officer. These days, she likes to operate by herself, driving a truck with a small reserve of water through the hundreds of miles of back roads that cut into the Eldorado. She is often the first on the scene at a fire, helping direct in crews of “hot shots,” the firefighting elite who clear the tree line. On slower days, she might serve as “Smokey’s wrangler,” accompanying the unlucky staffer who has to don the sweaty mascot costume and make safety presentations to kids.

Many women in the Forest Service told me that “fire is a small world,” and that they repeatedly had to fight the perception that they were only there to meet men. Rice, who exudes a no-bullshit air of competence, prided herself on her toughness. When I visited her at her home in January, she drove to meet me on a four-wheeler, flanked by two bulldogs. “When you work in fire, you have to have a really thick skin,” she said.

Around 2008, Rice was a captain being groomed for promotion when she was befriended by her boss’ boss, a division chief named Mike Beckett. After about a year, their interactions took on a different tone. By Rice’s account, Beckett would describe sexual dreams he’d had about her and comment on her body. When they texted about work, he responded with crass double entendres. He cornered her in the office, followed her into the bathroom, and tried to touch her or lift her shirt. She said he groped or touched her inappropriately at least 20 times.

Even when she was out in the field, Rice felt as if there was no escape. Sometimes Beckett would wait late for her to return to the office. He took to radioing in to ask her location and seemed to monitor the line for word of her whereabouts: He’d appear, unannounced, when she was in some remote location—say, a tower lookout high in the Sierras. “He was paying a lot of attention to an employee three to four pay grades below him, which is uncommon,” recalled Rice’s former direct supervisor, who still works at the Forest Service. “He was constantly going around me.”

It became so uncomfortable that Rice stopped calling in her location—a significant safety risk. Eventually, Beckett arranged for her to be moved out of the office she shared with a colleague and into a room on her own. It was more of a storage area, recalled the former supervisor, tucked in the back of the building. During this time, her oversight duties were stripped from her one by one, Rice later said in a signed affidavit, and the former supervisor confirmed in an interview. (Beckett declined to answer any questions, and the Forest Service said it couldn’t comment on specific allegations.)

Still, Rice was reluctant to take formal action. She didn’t want to be “one of those women,” she explained. “You don’t cry in front of the guys, you don’t show weakness in front of them. And you don’t file. You just don’t file. You suck up and deal.” But one day in 2011, she said, after three years of harassment, Beckett came into her office and, with a letter opener, poked

her repeatedly on her chest, drawing a circle around her nipple. She filed. Randy Meyer, the Eldorado union steward, said he got a phone call from Rice “that scared me to death. She was highly emotional and beside herself.” He told a senior forest manager that he was prepared to alert the police—and “then everybody and his brother got involved in this mess.”

Denice Rice.

In the ensuing investigation, some 30 of Rice’s and Beckett’s colleagues were interviewed about humiliating details that Rice hadn’t even confided to her husband. “Everybody knew that he took me in the bathroom, tried to take my clothes off, things that he would say to me: ‘I want to watch you pee.’ They all knew,” she said. “And I still work with these people.” Rice said she got sick from the stress. The supervisor added that once, after he went to check on Rice, Beckett threatened him with disciplinary action.

In 2012, at the district ranger’s request, Rice’s supervisor called an all-hands meeting. Rice was certain that Beckett would be on the agenda. She begged not to have to attend, but said she was required to show up. (Rice’s former supervisor couldn’t verify this, but said the meeting was handled insensitively: “Nobody took into consideration that maybe she was still feeling like the target in the case.”) The situation with Beckett was discussed in front of at least 50 colleagues; Rice walked out in tears. “I think that was the worst thing that ever happened to me,” she said.

When we spoke, Rice was jumpy and broke down several times. “I can’t go anywhere without wondering, ‘Do people know who I am?’” she said. One male firefighter who has worked with Rice for five years told me, “It changed her whole life. People know Denice’s story on the forest, so she has this cloud around her. I’ve seen it for four years. I see Denice ‘trigger’ all the time: in classroom settings, out in the woods.”

Ultimately, the ranger in charge of the investigation recommended that Beckett should be fired. But Beckett retired before any action could be taken. Meanwhile, Rice’s career has effectively stalled. The firefighter who worked with Rice requested anonymity, explaining, “If the powers that be tie me to her in any way, I’ll never promote here again.”

Rice's ordeal wasn't unique. Lesa Donnelly said that in her capacity as an advocate, she has been contacted by scores of women in the service in California who allege they've been punished for pursuing sexual harassment complaints. One 22-year-old forestry technician filed a claim, and, several days afterwards, was visited by officials who searched only her side of the barracks with a drug dog. According to a subsequent complaint she lodged with the Forest Service, her roommate told her that one official had remarked, "You guys must have pissed someone off." The woman left the service soon afterwards.

Elisa Lopez-Crowder, a 34-year-old Navy veteran, was hired as a firefighter in 2010. She ran 45-pound sections of hose into the forest and cleared live trees to create fuel breaks. In her first months on the Eldorado, she said, an assistant captain asked her whether she'd been a "bitch" or a "slut" in the Navy, and whether her skin was really that color or just dirty. One day while she was clearing brush, she claimed, he hoisted her by her line gear and threw her to the ground; according to a male coworker's account, he held her down with his foot. The coworker intervened, and later joined her to report the matter to their captain.

The assistant captain was briefly placed on administrative leave. (In a court declaration he said Lopez-Crowder had "tripped" and that "before I helped her up, I jokingly placed my foot on her pack.") While an investigation was still underway, he was assigned to the same work sites as Lopez-Crowder. About a year later, she traveled with Donnelly and other Forest Service women to bring their concerns to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack in Washington, D.C. Lopez-Crowder said Vilsack apologized and assured her that the assistant captain had been removed from his position; it fell to Lopez-Crowder to tell the secretary that he was still on the Forest Service payroll. A short time later, the assistant captain left the force. Lopez-Crowder transferred out of the firefighting division anyway, fearing that she had become a target. "In the years I served in the military," she said, "I never encountered such discrimination and harassment as I have working for the U.S. Forest Service."

Alicia Dabney, a mother of three who lives on the Tule River Indian reservation, became a firefighter, like her father and uncles before her, at the age of 26 in the Sequoia National Forest. According to Equal Employment Opportunity complaints she filed in 2011 and 2012, Dabney claimed that coworkers made disparaging remarks about her Latina and

Comanche heritage and joked about sexually assaulting women. She said a male supervisor instructed her and another female firefighter to tell him when they began menstruating. At a training academy, other participants left lewd sexual propositions on her voicemail. One day she arrived at work to find the floor of the engine house strewn with printouts that read “Alicia Dabney The Whore.” (She provided a photo of the printouts.)

Alicia Dabney.

Some of the harassment was physical. Once, a male coworker jumped on her neck, “riding me like a big horse,” she recalled. On an assignment in Texas, she said, a supervisor put her in a chokehold and threw her on his hotel bed. A USDA investigation substantiated the first of those incidents but denied that there had been a “pattern of harassment.” In 2012, Dabney was informed that the Forest Service was initiating her termination, claiming she had omitted part of her criminal record—a misdemeanor vandalism charge—and failed to disclose federal debt on her application. (Dabney maintains that she disclosed both.) In 2013, Dabney left and signed a settlement agreement with the Forest Service.

In 2011, the USDA put the Forest Service into temporary receivership for its failure to adequately respond to sexual harassment claims. For the next year, all EEO complaints were handled by the secretary’s office in Washington. Tom Tidwell, the chief of the Forest Service, explained in an email to staff that the change would allow the agency “to better process a series of EEO complaints within the Forest Service that, frankly, we have not handled well.”

In the Canyon’s River District, the problems had continued unabated since Cheyenne Szydlo’s 2006 trip. Certain boatmen were repeatedly accused of harassing or assaulting women in strikingly similar scenarios. One young boatman covered his Park Service boat hatch with pictures of topless women and boasted to coworkers, including Dan Hall, about a side gig recruiting college women for Girls Gone Wild-style videos. Hall said that half a dozen intermittent boatmen who, like him, objected to the boat shop’s culture, found themselves blacklisted from river assignments. And even in the rare cases when management did take swift action, the targets weren’t always the people you’d expect.

In 2011, Mike Harris, a contract hire then in his late 50s, was training a 40-year-old river ranger named Chelly Kearney to operate a new boat. She said that he directed her to pull to the shore, away from their group, and announced that he was going to take a bath. Then, she said, he removed all of his clothes and invited Kearney to join him in the water. When Kearney asked if they could leave, he put on his life jacket and climbed back on the boat naked. He “stood there with his penis completely exposed,” Kearney later wrote in a detailed letter to park leadership. “I stated to Harris, 'Do not get on this boat until you put your clothes on.' He stated to me that he needed to dry his clothes out. I said, 'No, do not get on this boat without your clothes.' He finally put on a pair of long underwear pants.” Harris confirmed to me that he climbed onto the front of the boat naked: “I just wanted to sit in the sun and dry out,” he said. However, he said he thought he had permission from Kearney to bathe and didn’t ask her to join him.

Upon Kearney’s return, she said she told a supervisor about the incident. The supervisor, she alleged, joked that they “used to not call it sexual harassment until the guy whipped out his penis and slapped you across the face with it.” Kearney didn’t take the matter further.

The next year, on another trip, a biologist I’ll call Lynn said Harris repeatedly asked her to sleep in his tent when hers started leaking during a rainstorm. After she refused, he set up his tent directly next to hers. Harris told me that he only asked Lynn to join him in his tent once, and hadn’t meant the invitation as a come-on. “It wasn’t to have sex,” Harris said. “I think I said something like ‘We could snuggle and that’s all.’”

Lynn said she emailed her supervisor about the episode. After a third female employee filed an EEO complaint about his behavior in 2013, Harris resigned. Lynn’s complaint was supposed to be confidential, but she noticed that boatmen she’d been friendly with began to act coldly toward her. And matters only escalated from there.

**The supervisor, Kearney alleged, joked that they “used to not call it sexual harassment**

## until the guy whipped out his penis and slapped you across the face with it.”

In February 2014, Dave Loeffler led a joint Park Service-private sector trip. Both Anne and Lynn were apprehensive about being on the river with him. At one point, Lynn said, a passenger inquired about a boatman who'd been let go and Loeffler ranted about “complainers” who had ruined boatmen’s lives. The following day, as the group approached a campsite, Lynn was standing in the bow of her boat when Loeffler pulled her out roughly by her life jacket—a shocking breach of river norms. Anne came up to Lynn on the beach to find her concealing tears behind her sunglasses. Lynn wanted to leave, but at that point there was no way for her to hike out.

On the last night, the party celebrated with dinner and drinks. A woman who worked for a private boat company produced a novelty penis-shaped straw she'd received at a bachelorette party and dropped it in a colleague's drink. People laughed and passed the straw around. At one point, Lynn was holding it when Loeffler tried to take her picture. Then, someone put on music. It was an eclectic playlist, and people danced accordingly: interpretive dance, head-banging, two-stepping. A hip-hop song came on, and the group started talking about twerking. Lynn gave a comically awkward demonstration in her heavy canvas Carhartt pants, puffy down jacket and rubber boots.

Two days later, Anne and Lynn were called into the offices of upper management and informed that they'd been accused of sexual misconduct. In written statements, Loeffler and two of his friends claimed that Anne and Lynn had shoved the penis straw in Loeffler's face, danced provocatively in short skirts, and, as one complainant put it, behaved “coquettishly” throughout the trip. “I felt I needed to remove myself from this increasingly hostile work environment,” Loeffler wrote in his statement. “They were being so rude and inappropriate to myself and others.” According to notes from the manager assigned to look into the situation, Loeffler said he wanted Anne and Lynn to be “treated similarly” to other employees accused of harassment—that is, with the Park Service deciding not to renew their contracts.

Both women protested to the managers that they were being retaliated against for their previous reports of sexual harassment. Nonetheless, the park launched an investigation, although both Superintendent David

Uberuaga and Deputy Superintendent Diane Chalfant would later acknowledge in an official report that it may not have been thorough enough. In particular, the investigators weren't made aware of the history between Anne, Lynn and the boatmen.

In a meeting, Lynn said Chalfant told her that Loeffler's charges couldn't be retaliatory, since Lynn's previous sexual harassment complaint was confidential. Both Lynn and Anne were informed that their contracts would not be renewed. In Lynn's termination letter, Chalfant wrote, "We cannot afford to have team members in our employment who are not on board with management's expectations and requirements."

"What happened to [Lynn] was the most horrifying thing I'd ever seen," said Chelly Kearney, who had made her own efforts to draw attention to the treatment of women on the river. About a year after she resigned in 2012, she wrote a 29-page letter to Grand Canyon Chief Ranger Bill Wright documenting multiple instances of harassment, assault and retaliation and describing a culture that protected male harassers while allowing victims to be targeted for retaliation. The Park Service requested a formal EEO investigation, but the final report was never distributed beyond the uppermost level of park management and no disciplinary actions were taken.

Following Lynn and Anne's dismissals, Kearney tried again. She forwarded her letter to Uberuaga, writing that she had witnessed a "disturbing and pervasive level of hatred" toward Anne and her boss and that Anne should be protected by federal whistle-blower laws. She received a brief response from Uberuaga thanking her for her concern.





Clockwise from top: Denice Rice, Cheyenne Szydlo, and Alicia Dabney.

Some former park employees now ruefully refer to the fateful party as “The Night on Cock-Straw Beach,” and the incident became an unlikely rallying point. Hall sent around an email asking a core group of former park employees and colleagues in private rafting companies to gather names of other women who’d been harassed or run out of the River District. With Donnelly’s help, 12 women and Hall wrote to Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell, requesting a formal investigation into the “pervasive culture of discrimination, retaliation, and a sexually hostile work environment” in the River District.

Where Donnelly had tried for decades to get federal authorities to intervene more decisively in the Forest Service, the DOI responded quickly. In October, its Office of Inspector General launched an investigation that grew from the 13 initial complainants to include multiple interviews with more than 80 people. Their final report would identify 22 additional victims or witnesses. It included accounts of Cheyenne Szydlo’s 2006 trip with Loeffler, the Halloween party where Edwards took the photo up Anne’s

skirt, the twerking incident that led to the complaint against Anne and Lynn, and several allegations involving a boatman that a former employee identified as Mike Harris.

The women's complaints, the investigators said, were "extremely credible." The investigators also determined that Chalfant, the deputy superintendent, had allowed the complaint letter signed by the 12 women and Hall to make its way to some of the accused boatmen, in violation of policy. In an interview, the lead investigator, Greg Gransback, criticized the park's handling of the accusations against Anne and Lynn. "If you compare what had happened to these two in the past and what they were accused of, I mean there's just no comparison. It's apples and oranges," he said. "The park got it wrong where they went overboard."

In a February response to the investigation, the Park Service's Intermountain Region didn't contest any of the details in the report, and admitted that, in many instances, appropriate action hadn't been taken. In the OIG report two boatmen whose actions are clearly consistent with those of Loeffler and Desrosiers deny all allegations made against them. (I was unable to reach Desrosiers directly despite contacting the Park Service, former colleagues, and two family members.) Boatman 3—whom a former employee identified as Loeffler—told the OIG that he "acknowledged making sexual remarks to women, but said that he did so only when he sensed a 'mutual attraction.'" James Doyle, the communications chief for the Intermountain Region, said he couldn't discuss individual allegations against employees and added, "We maintain a zero tolerance for sexual harassment and hostile workplace environment."

During the year and a half that the investigation was underway, the park made some changes. After Bill Wright transferred out of the district, his role was filled by a woman. The policy for staff boat trips was revised. There would be no alcohol permitted and an outside supervisor would be required on all expeditions. Dave Desrosiers retired in May 2015. According to its response to the OIG, the Park is introducing a detailed plan to improve its sexual harassment policies, and considering disciplinary action against managers who mishandled complaints. All employees are now required to wear "standard uniforms" on river trips.

The OIG team was more than familiar with sexual harassment cases: Gransback had worked on the inquiry that resulted from the 1996 Aberdeen Proving Ground scandal, when 12 Army officers were charged with assaulting female trainees. Still, Gransback told me that even he and his seasoned colleagues teared up when they heard Grand Canyon women describe the fine line they had to walk to do their jobs, “between not being hated and not being desired.”

In the Tailhook case, he noted, the accused military members had developed a “Top Gun” mentality, believing they were too important to be taken down. He observed the same dynamic at work among the boatmen. “They became almost untouchable,” he said. But the military, Gransback pointed out, has made “drastic changes,” including evidence-based sexual harassment and assault prevention programs. So far, neither the Park or Forest Service has proposed anything so extensive. (Since June 2015, the Forest Service’s California region has strengthened its protocols for sexual harassment training and reporting, a spokesperson said.)

In my conversations with the women, they expressed great pride in their strength. For years, they had performed dangerous, physically demanding jobs. Many of them had faced life-threatening situations. All of them had operated within environments in which women had very little room for error. The harassment they described had not only brought about personal humiliation or the loss of a job or even a career. It had shaken their entire perception of themselves—as tough and resilient, able to handle anything that man or nature could throw at them.

They lost other things, too. After her boat trip with Loeffler, Cheyenne Syzdlo found herself avoiding the river. “When I’d hear people talk about how much they loved river trips, I’d be like, ‘Oh God, I hated them, I hated them,’” she told me. Then, in the course of our conversations, she came across an email she’d written to a friend after her second time in the Grand Canyon, before she’d ever met Dave Loeffler.

In her message, Syzdlo described the thrill of riding huge rapids in the bow of an inflatable boat. She remembered how even the most experienced guides would pause and become tense, studying the water before steering them in. She recalled the night her group camped on a sliver of beach

when a thunderstorm suddenly erupted, sending loose boulders tumbling down the sheer cliff face. She and her colleagues had huddled in their tents and contemplated the possibility that they might die, and then, when the morning dawned damp and bright, laughed as they fished their supplies out of the river. “I’d never thought about that second trip again because the third trip did change everything. It was magical,” she told me. “It’s so primitive and you feel so free. You never experience that in life.” She’d forgotten about it for nearly a decade, but that morning on the river, she hadn’t wanted to leave.

### **CREDITS**

This article was reported in partnership with [The Investigative Fund](#) at The Nation Institute.

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