

A free flowing river, and the need for continuing vigilance.

Dale Will, CVEPA Vice President

According to Ute elder Roland McCook, the Ute name for the Crystal River Valley was “Nuche-Mu-Gu-Avatum-Ada’he” or “the people’s place of the heart.” The first whites into the valley somewhat unimaginatively named the river “Rock Creek.” The contrast in cultural sensitivity was palpable. It was soon realized by early settlement boosters that “Rock Creek” wasn’t great advertising. John Osgood and his burgeoning interests in Redstone promoted a name change, eventually persuading the Department of the Interior in 1901 to rename it the Crystal River.

For over a century, water users south of Silt and Rifle have dreamed of impounding the Crystal, one of the last undammed rivers in Colorado. These dreams were amplified by the Colorado River Storage Act of 1956 which formalized the threat. The proposed Placita Dam would have created a reservoir that would have flooded a huge area which includes the largest and most ecologically valuable wetland in the Crystal River Valley. In 1957 the Colorado River Conservation District (CRCD) obtained conditional water rights to use Crystal water for “generation of electric energy, domestic and municipal purposes, industrial purposes, including but not limited to the production of oil shale, irrigation purposes, and stock watering purposes.” The West Divide Water Conservancy District was formed in 1964 with taxing authority for the project. Over the years, focus shifted to oil shale development.

Since its founding in 1972, the Crystal Valley Environmental Protection Association (CVEPA) has opposed dams on the Crystal River. Strong allies later appeared which coalesced with the creation of the Pitkin County Healthy Rivers program in 2008. Sustained legal and political pressure finally persuaded the Colorado River District to the West Divide Project altogether in 2013.

Meanwhile, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was passed in 1968 as one of several keystone environmental laws enacted with bi-partisan support during that era. This act changed various federal agencies to look at eligibility of waterways for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. During the 1980s the White River National Forest deemed the Crystal River eligible for designation and protection, which would *permanently* protect the river from dams and diversions. All that is now required is an Act of Congress. However, such designations are unfortunately rare, as Congressional delegations seek virtual unanimity from locals before proceeding. While a passionate group of environmental organizations have pushed this protection for the Crystal, the effort has thus far been stymied by paranoia of some local ranchers afraid of federal oversight of the river.

This political situation led to the formation of the Crystal River Collaborative Steering Committee, with representatives from Gunnison County, Pitkin County, Marble, Colorado River Water Conservation District and West Divide Water Conservancy District. While the Committee has yet to reach consensus on Wild and Scenic, it recently approved an Intergovernmental Agreement whereby the five signatories agreed not to support any new reservoir or impoundment of water on the main stem of the Crystal and oppose any water rights application that would remove water from the Crystal River basin.

CVEPA lauds the commitment of these five agencies to respect the sanctity of our river. However, we are disappointed that a more durable protection has not yet been achieved. Paragraph 3 of the agreement provides that each signatory may “terminate their participation” at any time. David Brower once famously quipped that environmental protection means we have to win every battle because even a single loss is often permanent. There is nothing in this agreement that would bar the River or Irrigation Districts from withdrawing and immediately again proposing dams and diversions.

For this reason, the CVEPA Board remains cautious. Given the stated transience of the commitments made in the Crystal River Intergovernmental Agreement, we must remain ever vigilant to protect “Nuche-Mu-Gu-Avatum-Ada’he” or “the people’s place of the heart.”