

Is the Grand Canyon a Fake?

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[EDITOR'S NOTE: This is at least the third in Earle Spamer's series of deep explorations of the Grand Canyon.]

There are more than 400 physiographic "Grand Canyons" in the world. How can this be!? After all, the chasm in Arizona is *The* Grand Canyon. How did the many "other" Grand Canyons come about? Are any of them, in fact, provably grand?

Just as puzzling are hundreds of differing ideas of what can be compared to the Grand Canyon. Few of them have anything to do either with canyons or grandness. What in the world can (a) be *like* the Grand Canyon, and also, by being so described, can (b) *displace* the concept of the real thing?

There is a profound misinformational abyss. The real Grand Canyon may not be what (or where) we think it is.

Service With a Simile

In 1903, Theodore Roosevelt, greatest-grinned of U.S. Presidents, visited the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, in Arizona. There he saw grandness for what it's worth, and he charged a cheering crowd to maintain the Grand Canyon "as it is . . . for your children's children." Now those grandchildren have aged -- like the canyon, whittled away by time. And the Grand Canyon still is not protected from the natural forces that wear it away.

Heroic schemes have been proposed (mostly by me) to rescue the Grand Canyon, or at least to do something to slow the erosion that is destroying this magnificent hole -- for example, to aluminum-coat its walls,¹ or fill the chasm with styrofoam packaging piffles.² The piffle-packing procedure was openly considered in 1990s, documented both in this journal (the *Annals of Improbable Research*) and in *Nature Notes*, Grand Canyon National Park's activities and public outreach newsletter, with artistic renderings of the project. Yet, thus far, no suitably grandiose-scale preservation programs have been successfully implemented.



For generations people have believed that there is one -- only one -- Grand Canyon. With bare notice, though, the name was seized by unimaginative etymological pirates. First, it reappeared as the "Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone River," in Wyoming. Later, it scattered to locales around the globe, ranging from the "Grand Canyon of Alabama" to the "Grand Canyon of Zambia."

Now there are more than 400 "Grand Canyons" in the world. Some even claim the status of "grandier," while others are likened to "little" versions of the original, real thing. No effective means exist to distinguish contenders from pretenders.

The situation is even more deeply muddy than I have just described. Scattered through literature and spattered across the web there are the hundreds of examples of things that are claimed to be "like" the Grand Canyon, or are allusions to it. This must be a literary trait inherited from thousands of generations past; or why else would Olduvai Gorge be called the "Grand Canyon of evolution"?³

"California Condor compares the depth of the Grand Canyon against other canyons."



"The author ponders how to measure grandness at the bottom of Grand Canyon."



“Evolution of thought. Mules contemplate man’s mismeasure of the grandness of Grand Canyon.”

From the Earth to the Moon, Mars and Miranda

In America, 43 states have at least one Grand Canyon. Seventy-three nations boast a Grand Canyon or two. There are Grand Canyons in the bottoms of oceans, too. Nevertheless, only a small number of the world’s Grand Canyons are recognized by agencies of geographic nomenclature, such as the U.S. Board of Geographic Names and the National Imagery and Mapping Agency. This still did not stop a few geographically challenged writers and bureaucrats from misplacing Arizona’s canyon altogether, calling it the “Grand Canyon of New Mexico,” “Nevada’s Grand Canyon,” and “Colorado’s Grand Canyon.” The Colorado transplant was sensationally replicated by the U.S. Postal Service in 1999 when they produced a full run of postage stamps portraying “Grand Canyon, Colorado.” All 100 million stamps were then destroyed.

Some Grand Canyons are enthusiastically entitled only by agenda-driven organizations like chambers of commerce (e.g., “Pennsylvania’s Grand Canyon” along Pine Creek, promoted by the nearby town of Wellsboro) or contrived by roadside enterprises (e.g., Ausable Chasm, New York, the “Grand Canyon of the East,” which is actually just one of seven places that each claim to be the Grand Canyon of the East). A few become popular and are elevated in status to state or regional parks (e.g., Providence State Park, “Georgia’s Little Grand Canyon”; or the Navajo Nation’s “Grand Canyon of the Little Colorado River Tribal Park,” in Arizona). Some anthropogenic chasms are sold as slogans of commercialism (e.g., the “Grand Canyon of American Business,” New York City’s Broadway, which is not to be confused with nearby Madison Avenue, the “Grand Canyon of midtown business”).

Most Grand Canyons are whimsically Grand, their Grandness spawned in the pens and keyboards of presumably professional writers. And for some, the sky is not the limit.

Two features on the moon are -- each -- called a “Grand Canyon.” Mars’ magnificent Valles Marineris is simultaneously called the “Grander Canyon,” the “Grand Canyon of Mars,” and the “Grand Canyon of the Solar System,” perhaps in some astro-musical attempt to score the entire Grand Canyon Suite.

One diligent researcher has identified in a radar image from the Magellan Venus orbiter an artificially constructed bridge spanning a “Venus Grand Canyon.” The planet Uranus boasts, or has had boasted on its behalf, a “grand canyon on the moon Miranda.” Miranda does not have an erosion-sculpted canyon, but its fault-bound cliffs do soar to ten times the height of the walls of Arizona’s water-engraved gorge.

Like It or Not

Beyond physiography, in the realm of analogy and metaphor, there’s a veritable cement mixer of grand canyons. Some terms are merely strained, but most are so stunningly pointless that “metaphor” and “simile” are words too good to apply to them. For example, Carlsbad Caverns is likened to “a Grand Canyon with a roof over it.” This is distinct from Skocjanske Jame, a cave in Slovenia said to be “a Grand Canyon under the earth.” For some reason, the second and third decades of the 20th century are the “Grand Canyon of history.” Radio bandwidth is a “national resource not unlike the Grand Canyon.” And so on. Each is a “Grand Canyon of originality” (yet another, from *The New York Times*, no less).⁴

Certain people are compared to the Grand Canyon. As you might expect, they are commanding figures of grace. Joan of Arc is one. Another is Barry Goldwater. He was a one-time Presidential candidate and for years a U.S. Senator representing the state of Arizona, which just so happens to be home to the original Grand Canyon (or what’s left of it).

There is a Finnish style of interior design called “Grand Canyon.” Models of several kinds of commercial products are named “Grand Canyon.” There



Theodore Roosevelt.



are Grand Canyon-style ceramic tiles, playground equipment, mattresses, motorcycles, and roofing shingles, among other things. “Grand Canyon Rust” is an appealing (to some, anyway) nail polish color. The U.S. Army Third Corps Artillery headquarters at Fort Hood, Texas, is trumpeted as being the “Grand Canyon of armor power.” Hell (not the town in Norway) is said to be a “Grand Canyon of fire.” And appropriately, the qualification exam given to prospective lawyers is the “Grand Canyon of torture.”

“The measure of absolute grandness. So grand is the Grand Canyon that overwhelmed tourists at El Tovar Hotel cannot walk the last 100 feet to the canyon rim.”

The great gorge of Arizona is itself the pinnacle of Grand Canyons. Conservationist John Muir called it “the grand canyon of canyons.” Regrettably reformulated by a lesser writer, it is also the “Grand Canyon of Grand Canyonness.” It’s enough to make an editor squeal.

The Zen of Canyonry

Imagine defining a canyon as an expanse of potholes. During World War II, builders of the Alaska-Canada Highway announced that they had found the “Grand Canyon of the Alcan.” It is a vast area of unstable permafrost depressions that complicated the task of roadway construction.

The streetscapes of large cities invoke comparison to the Grand Canyon. East Sixth Street is said to be the “Grand Canyon of Cleveland.”

Large open-pit mines include the “Man-Made Grand Canyon of the North,” which is evidently the pride of Hibbing, Minnesota, a town better known to some as the boyhood home of singer Bob Dylan.

Fantasy is sometimes indistinguishable from imagination. Why a shadow-shrouded waterfall in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania -- or a circular lake in the American Midwest -- should be called a Grand Canyon is perplexing. Depth is not a criterion. The “Grand Canyon of Florida,” Fakahatchee Strand in the Everglades, is “unlike other canyons” in that its depth is just inches! But care must be taken not to confuse this with “Florida’s Famous Underwater Grand Canyon,” which is completely immersed at Weeki Wachee Springs, the so-called “City of Mermaids” destination for family entertainment since 1947.

Phantasieland in Bruehl, Germany, takes entertainment to a higher level with its “Grand Canyon” rollercoaster. And the Six Flags Over Texas theme park has “Wile E. Coyote’s Grand Canyon Blaster,” surely the acme of rollercoasters.

The human imagination works greater wonders yet. The course of the Colorado River after its Grand Canyon climax, where it flows through the open deserts toward its delta in Mexico, has been called the “Grand anti-Canyon of North America.” Its antithesis, appropriately located on the opposite side of the globe, is Uluru (Ayers Rock), in Australia’s Northern Territory, known to some as the “anti-Grand Canyon.”



“National Park Service crew works at ensuring the greater grandeur of the one true Grand Canyon.”

Gullible Travels

Many neologists go about their work honestly, calling their canyons the “Little Grand Canyon,” “Small Grand Canyon,” “Baby Grand Canyon,” or “Miniature Grand Canyon.” Implying equality at least, there is “The Other Grand Canyon,” which compares to Arizona’s canyon but clearly puts a limit (two) to the number of Grand Canyons in the world. Problematically, two canyons claim to be “The Other” Grand Canyon -- one sits in the Pacific Ocean off the California coast, the other is in Idaho.

In fact, the size of Arizona’s Grand Canyon was only an educated guess when the Smithsonian Institution first mentioned the place in 1857. It was called “Big Canyon” then. Only a few non-Native people had ever seen it, and their scant descriptions only bemoaned that it was a barrier to travel. That did not stop geologist Edward Hitchcock from guessing its depth. Explorers had already visited the Grand Falls along the Little Colorado River, which is a hundred miles from that river’s confluence with the Colorado River in the deep of Grand Canyon. Hitchcock noted the falls’ height of 120 feet, and opined that the depth of the Little Colorado’s nascent gorge there was “less probably than that of the Big Cañon.”⁶ As yet, even now, the Smithsonian has not addressed the discrepancy between this figure and the Grand Canyon’s true depth, which is more than one mile.

Canyonity is all about depth; the deeper the better. But surprisingly, a canyon’s “depth” has been redefined. It was and still is measured from top to bottom. However, canyons that have no rims per se (deep declivities in mountain ranges, for example) are measured relative to the tops of nearby mountain peaks. Even the National Geographic Society embraces this method of determining depth, and to this end the Society has identified and promoted the idea that there are “deeper” and “grander” canyons than Arizona’s famous chasm. This is geological nonsense.

The magnificent canyons of the American Southwest and comparable canyons in other parts of the world are there because powerfully flowing rivers cut -- deeply -- into and through plateaus. The putatively deeper and grander-than-Grand canyons have rivers that never were at the heights of neighboring mountaintops. This is a sensational redefinition of how depth is created. This is Grand redefinition done for the sake of jazzing up magazines and travel brochures. And, in fact, none of these chasms that are supposedly grander than Grand Canyon are in the United States. Other nations entice adventurers to distant lands and eagerly awaiting travel guides. They make no complaint about the diabolical detumescence of America’s

Grand Canyon. Perhaps, one might suggest, there is a conspiracy of nationalist geographic disinformation.



At Last: One True Grand Canyon?

Geysir in Haukadalur, Iceland, is the etymological source of all the world’s geysers. Capitalized, Geysir is a name protected by Iceland for use exclusively in reference to their most historical geyser. Should the United States follow Iceland’s example? Should there be American legislation to restrict the number of Grand Canyons, or to set the size of “true” Grand Canyons? As a separate question: should there be a Grand Canyon universal standard -- not kept in an airtight vault in Paris like the old meter and kilogram standards, but one defined by wavelengths and atomic oscillations?

“Theatre in the ground. National Park Service ranger at Grand Canyon discusses perspective and erosion.”

Begin the campaign! Much as countries have protocols for succession in government, or complex genealogies of heraldry and peerage, there can and should be a hierarchy of canyons. It begins with the first, the true (or at least truest) Grand Canyon.

If you live in the U.S., do your part to bring this about. Write letters to newspaper editors, who always look for interesting opinions. Make your feelings known to your elected state and federal representatives, who are bound (by self-interest, if nothing else) to tackle these difficult issues on your behalf.⁷ Or write a letter to the President. He may believe that the Grand Canyon is in Palo Duro State Park, the “Grand Canyon of Texas,” but state your case if you disagree!

Notes

1. As implied in “Introducing Aluminum-LPCVP,” *Solid State Technology*, vol. 25, no. 5, May 1982, p. 7.
2. The proposal to fill the Grand Canyon with styrofoam packaging piffles was noted by E.E. Spamer, “Preserving the Grand Canyon: Final Report,” pp. 94-96 in *Sex as a Heap of Malfunctioning Rubble (and Further Improbabilities)*, Marc Abrahams, ed., Workman Publishing, New York, 1993. This was reprinted with new illustrations by Grand Canyon National Park in *Nature Notes*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1996. Follow-up research was presented in “The Grand Canyon -- Further Final Report, and Users’ Guide,” *Annals of Improbable Research*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1997.
3. It is impossible to cite here more than a few of the hundreds of sources that document these real and metaphorical “Grand Canyons.” This is an act of scholarly faith. Each example is in my files, which someday may be entombed in some hapless archive; watch for them.
4. “Jazz Ballet Program,” Clive Barnes, *The New York Times*, October 11, 1965, p. 54.
5. As read in a travel journal by “Lisa,” posted on the web at www.penguindust.com/lisa/journals/2002/020904.html [viewed by me on September 8, 2005].
6. “Illustrations of Surface Geology,” Edward Hitchcock, *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge*, vol. 9, 1857, p. 116. Actually, the height of Grand Falls is 185 feet, still less than the depth of the Grand Canyon.
7. Inasmuch as Arizona is already officially “The Grand Canyon State,” proof should be offered that the association is to the correct Grand Canyon. Arizona’s Governor and the Arizona Office of Tourism have taken steps. In May 2005, the state moved to (their quote) “reclaim the Grand Canyon” from the marketing moguls of Las Vegas, Nevada, who promote tours to the canyon as if it were a part of Nevada. An Arizona state tourism spokesperson defended the action by pointing out that “It’s on our license plates.”

