

Whitewater Rock

Christina Williams remembers how much fun she was having with her family on their first white water rafting trip.

Christina remembers floating along on a wide part of the river where the water ran slowly and she and her sister could get out of the raft and swim. She remembers hearing a distant roaring sound as the river narrowed and headed around a bend. She remembers the river guide explaining that they were approaching a rapid he called “Dragon’s Teeth.”

The next thing she remembers was waking up in the hospital and finding out that two days had gone by.

Christina’s father told her what had happened.

The raft on which they were riding was the second one in the group to approach the rapids at “Dragon’s Teeth.” The Dragon’s Teeth rapid gets its name from a row of rocks that stick up in the water, making it look as though the rafts have to pass through the jaws of an enormous animal. This part of the river is much narrower also, forcing the water to speed up and tumble over itself. It is a Class 4 rapid, the most difficult part of this river. (Class 5 rapids are considered the most difficult rapids that are possible to navigate with a boat.)

“An experienced river guide should be able to get through Dragon’s Teeth without too much problem,” says Dusty Jones, a river guide with Extreme Outfitters, the company with which Christina’s family was riding. “We take hundreds of rafts through that rapids every summer, and this year, only four of our rafts flipped over in that area.”

The problem is a rock right in the middle of the Dragon’s Teeth. It’s the biggest rock in the row and is in direct line with the flow of water. Over time, the power of the water has worn away at the base of the rock, creating an undercut where rafts can easily get trapped.



“In most cases,” explains Dusty, “a raft will bounce right off a rock and follow the current of the water around it. But an undercut rock is different. Part of the rock sticks up above the water, but below the water the rock is worn away, creating a gap like a cavity in a tooth. Instead of bouncing off, the raft gets trapped in the gap. Once a boat is trapped, it’s really hard to get it out. The force of the current is just too strong.”

The guide in the first raft in Christina’s group was able to keep that boat to the left of the river channel, away from the Dragon’s Teeth cavity. But the raft Christina was riding in lurched forward on a surge of water and was pushed right up against the cavity. A third raft bumped into them on its way through the rapids causing Christina’s raft to flip over. Christina, at the front of the raft, was tossed into the water and sucked into the undercut of the rock. The force of the water trapped her there under the water.

“She’s lucky we were able to get her out at all,” Dusty says. “That was one of the scariest moments of my life.”

It took four people and two ropes to get Christina out from under the rock and out of the water. She was unconscious.

“We were able to call for help while one of the other guides did CPR and got her breathing again. We try to be prepared for emergencies like this, though it would be better if these kinds of things never happened.”

Christina was lucky. She had bruises from head to toe and one broken arm. She still has no memory of the accident, but she is expected to fully recover.

She and her family found out later that her accident was the third one on that rock this year. And two years ago, a river guide died in that spot rescuing another rafter who was trapped.

Each year, the undercut on the rock gets bigger, as more and more water pounds away at it, wearing away at the rock below the water’s surface.

“It seems inevitable that there will be more accidents there if something doesn’t change,” says Dusty.

Last year a group of river guides suggested that the rock be moved or removed entirely to make the rapid safer. But a group of conservationists is trying to prevent any changes to the river.

“If we move that rock, then where does it stop? Do we move every rock that makes it hard to get down the river? Changing the river will have an enormous impact on how the water flows downstream,” says Jonathan Charles, a local rancher and leader of the conservationist group. “The river should be left alone.”

“We’re not trying to change the river to make it easier to raft,” says Dusty. “We just want that one spot to be safer before anyone else is seriously injured or worse.”

What do you think? Should the rock be moved? The Bureau of Land Management is holding a meeting next Tuesday to hear public opinion before making a decision.