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Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park

Colorado National Parks

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Senate OKs Purchase at Black Canyon

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National monuments. Black Canyon of Gunnison (Colorado)

Black Canyon aswirl in water debate

Post 12-29-98 P 31A

By Mark Obmascik
Denver Post Staff Writer

How much water does it take to kill a tree? That's one of the key questions the National Park Service is trying to answer in one of the highest-stakes Colorado water fights in years.

At Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument near Montrose, federal dams have withheld so much flow from the Gunnison River that box elders and willows have started to grow in the depths of the 2,000-foot chasm.

If the environment inside the

canyon were natural, the vegetation wouldn't be there, park officials say. Before the dams were built, the canyon depths were scoured every year by vast flood flows of snowmelt.

So the National Park Service is proposing, for the first time, to obtain the legal rights to enough water that, the agency says, will protect the natural environment of the 12-mile canyon.

"Without a return to more natural flows, someday a visitor would stand at the canyon rim and all you would see is the tops of trees," said

park superintendent Sheridan Steel. "The National Park Service is supposed to protect the natural values, and we're trying to do that."

The rub: Environmental groups say the park service isn't claiming enough water.

In a canyon where the river plunges 95 feet every mile — one of the greatest drops of any North American river — the park service should be demanding more than just high spring flows, the groups say. The park service also should get legal guarantees for enough water to ensure healthy trout popu-

lations all year, they say. The Gunnison River is one of the West's top trout streams.

"Unfortunately, the park service did not propose the strongest case it could," said Menna Kassen of Trout Unlimited. "If the park service doesn't get more water, especially in the winter, that fishery will be decimated."

At issue in the Black Canyon is the basic nature of a 20,700-acre tract that now serves at the mercy of three major federal dams that form Blue Mesa, Morrow Point and Crystal reservoirs. Be-

fore these upstream dams were built after the national monument was created, the dams have a legal right weaker than the monument's.

But the National Park Service is trying to strike a compromise by agreeing to weaken its own right to Gunnison River water so that the national monument gets equal priority for river flows with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's dams.

We're trying to resolve this through negotiated settlement in-

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