

Recently there have been several media and internet reports concerning the National Park Service's interpretation of the formation of the Grand Canyon.

The National Park Service uses the latest National Academy of Sciences explanation for the geologic formation of the Grand Canyon. Our guidance to the field is contained in the NPS Management Policies 2006 and NPS Director's Order # 6 and requires that the interpretive and educational treatment used to explain the natural processes and history of the Earth must be based on the best scientific evidence available, as found in scholarly sources that have stood the test of scientific peer review and criticism. Our commitment to scientific accuracy is also driven by Director's Order #11B, which requires us to ensure the objectivity of the information we disseminate.

Therefore, our interpretive talks, way-side exhibits, visitor center films, etc use the following explanation for the age of the geologic features at Grand Canyon. If asked the age of the Grand Canyon, our rangers use the following answer.

The principal consensus among geologists is that the Colorado River basin has developed in the past 40 million years and that the Grand Canyon itself is probably less than five to six million years old. The result of all this erosion is one of the most complete geologic columns on the planet.

The major geologic exposures in Grand Canyon range in age from the 1.7 billion year old Vishnu Schist at the bottom of the Inner Gorge to the 270 million year old Kaibab Limestone on the Rim.

So, why are there news reports that differ from this explanation? Since 2003 the park bookstore has been selling a book that gives a Creationist view of the formation of the Grand Canyon, claiming that the canyon is less than six thousand years old. This book is sold in the inspirational section of the bookstore. In this section there are photographic texts, poetry books, and Native American books (that also give an alternative view of the canyon's origin).

The park's bookstore contains scores of texts that give the NPS geologic view of the formation of the canyon.

We do not use the Creationist text in our teaching nor do we endorse its content. However, neither do we censor alternative beliefs. Much like your local public library, you will find many alternative beliefs, but not all of these beliefs are used in the school classroom.

It is not our role to tell people what to believe. We recognize that alternative views exist, but we teach the scientific explanation for the formation of the Grand Canyon.

I hope this explanation helps.

David Barna
Chief of Public Affairs
National Park Service
Washington, DC
Registered Professional Geologist (AIPG #6528)
Licensed Geologist (North Carolina #129)