RIVERSIDE *STORIES*

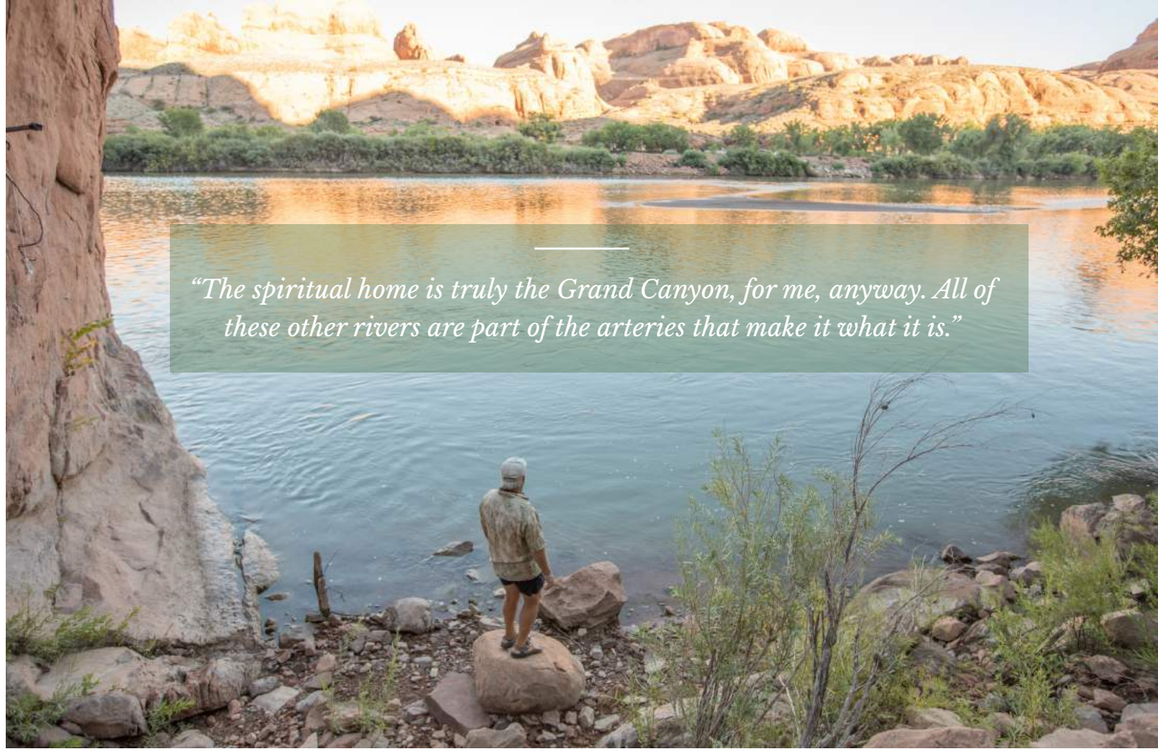
MICHAEL SMITH

Founder of Plateau Restoration in Moab, Utah

MICHAEL SMITH, Founding Board Chairman of Plateau Restoration, has taken many roads to get to where he is today. For three decades he's lived in Moab, Utah working to rejuvenate the Colorado Plateau, largely through the revegetation of riverside lands impacted by invasive species such as tamarisk (salt cedar). Michael's decision to start an organization focused on restoration work was inspired by the environmental changes he'd seen over the course of 21 years he spent as a raft guide, and through his experiences as a recreation superintendent, work with the National Park Service, including a stint as a River Ranger, and employment with Canyonlands Field Institute.

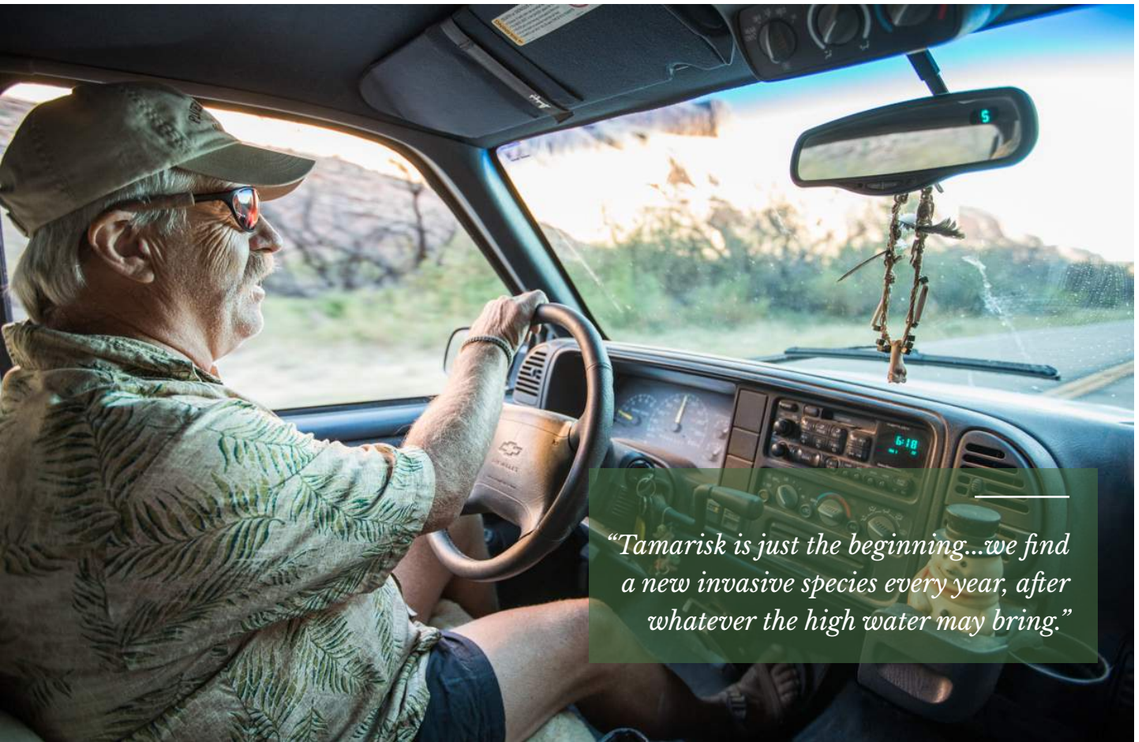
"Part of the Whole"

When Michael came to the West for the first time in the 70s, directly out of high school in North Carolina, he knew he'd found his home. "The sky was blue, and it didn't rain often. I just loved that, and the stark naked landscape. The first time I was hiking in Arizona in the moonlight, I was like 'that's it, this is the place," Michael recalls. "I've run almost every river in the Southwest nonstop since the late 70s. I've probably boated the Westwater stretch on the Colorado River 300 times. The spiritual home is truly the Grand Canyon, for me anyway. All of these other rivers are part of the arteries that make it what it is. I love the Green, and the San Juan, and the Dolores [rivers]. They're all part of the whole, they're all part of the Plateau. They're all important."



"The spiritual home is truly the Grand Canyon, for me, anyway. All of these other rivers are part of the arteries that make it what it is."

These experiences provided Michael a unique perspective on the spread of invasive species, such as tamarisk, across the landscape. In the 70s, Michael recalls, tamarisk expansion wasn't seen as an issue. This, however, changed over the last several decades. Michael attributes the proliferation of non-native plants largely to human activity, citing our effect on the spreading of seeds as tantamount to our need to develop, "We're so mobile, there's a lot of us. We drive, we fly, we're everywhere. That wasn't the case in the 50s, 60s, and 70s." Coupled with changes in land and water management, such as the construction of dams that restrict the timing, duration, and intensity of spring flood events, invasive plants spread and alter the ecosystem, out-competing native plants and creating dense thickets that blanket the landscape.



"Tamarisk is just the beginning...we find a new invasive species every year, after whatever the high water may bring."

Today, his organization's efforts are starting to have a clearly positive effect on the restoration process, but Michael is pragmatic. "Tamarisk is just the beginning," he warns. "There are many more invasive plants coming down stream. It seems we find a new invasive species every year, after whatever the high water may bring." Over the last five to ten years, Michael has realized that the restoration of lands impacted by tamarisk needs to be comprehensive, and should include the treatment of other invasive plants and restoration with native plant species. As Michael postulates, "It's very expensive to do this, and it's very long term to get it back to what it was, and make it desirable for wildlife."

As part of its holistic approach to improving the land, Plateau Restoration has launched dozens of revegetation projects along the Colorado Plateau, planting as many as 20,000 native trees and shrubs. In the past eight years, Plateau Restoration has also expanded toward providing educational tours and programs in an effort to engage local citizens and visitors in ongoing restoration efforts.

"We have millions of tourists who come here, but less than 1% help with anything. They do help the economy, but if you don't give them an opportunity to help, they can't do anything," he says. Since then, a few thousand people have gone through his program, and many have gone on to continued service in the resource management field.

In an educational spirit intrinsic to his character, Michael fervently suggests, "Take some time to find out about the place that you're going to visit. Find out what it means to be a good visitor. Do a trip with us, and we can get you very aware in a day about how to travel as lightly as possible, and make you aware of problem species that are coming in. It doesn't take that much time to be familiar with the basics." ■

This is part of the Riverside Stories *series, brought to you by the Tamarisk Coalition in partnership with the Southeast Utah Riparian Partnership, and funded by the Walton Family Foundation.*

To learn more about other individuals doing great work along rivers, visit http://tamariskcoalition.org/about-us/riverside-stories.

Photography Credit: Zach Mahone