

Mojave Expedition

3/30/2007

Last Day: Homeward Bound or
The Wild Ride or
Adventure in Afton or
In a Creek without a Paddle
By: Geoff Hammond



This was a leisurely morning of packing, breakfasting and saying good byes to fellow teachers and scientists. I had agreed to drive Chris McKay to Pasadena today but when we met up he informed me that he had secured a ride with someone else who was headed in the same direction. I was looking forward to the conversation that inevitably transpires on long desert transects but now I found myself with some extra time that I hadn't accounted for.

I said a silent goodbye to Zzyzx Research Station as I pulled out onto the windy, well maintained dirt road that had become so familiar over the last week. As I drove I let my mind reflect over the incredible experiences I had, the people I met, and the invaluable opportunities both professionally and personally that the Spaceward Bound program continues to bring my way. Just before the 15 freeway Zzyzx Road becomes paved again and when I hit this section it awoke me from my trance, and I was inspired by an idea. With the extra time I had before I was expected home perhaps I should take a quick side trip and explore a bit more of Afton Canyon. I wanted to take another look at the campground and see what was on the other side of the river that we were unable to cross two days prior. I was convinced that my Jeep Cherokee would have no problems crossing this deterrence. Without any hesitation I took the Afton Road exit and was soon barreling down a dirt road headed back to the canyon. As I came around the final bend and began to drop down to the river crossing I was surprised to see a minivan, recently towed from the depths, sitting on the bank. Its hood was open and the engine was smoking and dripping water. There were four high school kids milling around the vehicle and what appeared to be one of their fathers tinkering over the engine. Two of these kids came up to chat as I stopped at the waters edge a little more hesitant now. They told me that the river dropped deeply in the middle and that their van had stalled and filled with water. They had sat in the water for an hour until someone came along and towed them back onto the bank. Currently they were waiting for their engine to dry sufficiently for them to restart and head home. I looked at their low profile two wheel drive minivan, said

thanks, and after some chest thumping, thought to myself, “Stand back boys and let me show you how it’s done.”

I cranked the Jeep to four wheel drive mode and began crossing at a nice steady pace with my head held high in confidence. All eyes were upon me and all was going well until I reached the dip in the middle of the river. A slight sense of alarm began to rise from within as I saw water splash over the truck’s hood and it felt like I was driving a boat instead of a car. Engine still running I pressed forward and my Jeep began to emerge from the depths and climb out the other side. Just as I was beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel my engine stalled, completely flooded! I had to put it in park and set my brake so that I didn’t slide backwards. “Ohh *!*?!*!”, I said to myself as I looked in the rear view mirror at the group watching me. Judging by their smiles they were obviously elated to have some company in their plight with the river!

I remember telling myself that I needed a plan and wondering what scientist Henry would do in this situation. Then I figured that Henry would use fractural equations, logical reasoning, and line plot graphs, done in his head, to deduce that the biological content on this side of the river would be equal to that on the other. Therefore, Henry would not be in this situation in the first place. I glanced over at the passenger side of my vehicle and noticed that water was beginning to seep through the door cracks and fill the interior with what would end up being two inches of river water. Just in case, I gave my ignition a couple of turns and was rewarded with only a click, click sound. Resigned, I rolled my pants up as high as they would go and stepped out into the river to assess the situation. The good news was: 1) the engine was now resting just above the surface of the water. 2) Because of a slant the driver’s side of the Jeep was remaining dry. 3) I had plenty of company. 4) My mountain bike was in the back of the SUV. The bad news was: 1) the passenger side was filling with water. 2) I didn’t have a cell phone. 3) I was past the point of no return in the river. 4) Mountain bike had a flat.

I decided I needed to start working on solutions and asked the kids for some help and they happily agreed. I soon had five people pushing the Jeep but to no avail. It was time for plan B. I jumped out again and opened the hood to allow the sun’s rays to access the engine. I then proceeded to wipe down and dry parts such as the battery cables and spark plugs with a rag hoping to speed the drying process. Approximately ten minutes passed, and I jumped back into the cab to give the ignition another shot. This time the engine turned over but it still didn’t sound promising. I decided that perhaps I would get my money’s worth from AAA and asked to use the high school kids’ cell phone. They replied to my request by saying, “We did have one until Jack here forgot that it was in his pocket and jumped in the river when we got stuck.” It was time for plan C. It was at this moment that I had visions of myself riding my mountain bike down the 15 freeway headed for home.

It was soon after this that a little jacked-up Suzuki Samurai with fat tires pulled up to the waters edge, and I watched a familiar scenario unfold before my eyes. The same two kids that greeted me earlier walked up to the Suzuki driver and gave their warnings about the dip in the middle. The driver said thanks and proceeded across. As the Suzuki bounced and splashed and sank lower into the water I could now hear the high schoolers chanting, “Stall, stall, stall.” But it was not to be. That little Suzuki splashed its way right through the middle of the river and up the other side passing beside my marooned Jeep and causing a wake that added another ½ inch of water into my cab.

I believe that this river crossing Samurai angered my Jeep just enough so that the next time I jumped into the cab to try the ignition I heard some very promising sounds. I pumped the gas pedal furiously and each time I turned the ignition it was sounding healthier and healthier. I could hear the exhaust bubbling up from the water behind me each time she turned over. It was now or never so I kept at it, bracing myself, ready to quickly engage the engine at the first signs of life. Miraculously, the exhaust bubbles increased and I heard the beautiful sound of my Jeep's engine sputtering and burping back to life. I slowly, yet deliberately, put her in gear and made my way up to the opposite shore and placed my Jeep in park (engine still running and well away from the water's edge). I sprang from the vehicle jumping and dancing and being truly elated! I'm sure my dance resembled a cross between Rocky Balboa and Happy Feet but, at this point, I didn't care. The kids actually joined me in cheering. After this brief celebration I walked back down to the water's edge to thank the minivan crew for their help. One of the high schoolers was quick to point out that I was now on the wrong side of the river. I said, more confidently than I actually felt, "this canyon goes all the way through and I can get back to the 15 that way." I asked if they wanted me to call anyone for them when I made it back to civilization. The father said, "No thanks," and explained that the people who towed them out would be back to give them a jump in about an hour, then he added, "I think it's better if my wife doesn't know what's happening right now." I had to laugh and then responded empathetically that I understood completely! I wished them luck and turned onward.

Back in the drivers' seat, thankful to be mobile again, I began the journey down Afton Canyon in search of the route that I knew existed back to the 15 freeway. I stopped briefly on a steep slope to open both passenger doors and rid myself of the remaining river water sloshing in my cab. Two days prior I had glanced at a map of this area and I now tried to recall as many details that I could while making my way down a rough dirt road that paralleled railroad tracks. The scenery became increasingly spectacular as the canyon narrowed and the cliffs rose hundreds of feet on either side. The ground became very sandy and the road would disappear and reappear at different intervals as I made my way along, up and over sand dunes. I kept thinking to myself that I wanted to come back to camp with my family and explore this incredible area.

After approximately thirty minutes of driving I spotted a utility truck parked along the railroad tracks. I made a bee line for him and asked for directions. He informed me that about 200 yards ahead I could cross the tracks and follow a series of smaller dirt roads to a main dirt road that would lead me to the freeways in about 20 minutes. He was very friendly and the directions were solid. I was soon able to spot the 15 freeway in the distance, a lifeline winding its way through this unforgiving environment. I silently gave thanks to the spirits of the Mojave and made my way home without further ado.

Thus I encountered an incredible ending to an incredible week of experiences. In retrospect to my trip home I should have done three things differently. 1) Brought a cell phone. 2) Taken pictures of my Jeep in the river. 3) And most importantly, waited at least two days (maybe two years) before telling my wife, Karen, about this drive home. I'll end this memorable expedition with an appropriate quote:

"Demand not that events should happen as you wish; but wish them to happen as they do happen and you will go on well." Epictetus