

A restless giant

Environmental warrior Martin Litton is as fired up as ever

Martin Litton, 95, wastes no time on proprieties. "I'm supposed to be dead, you know," he growls on a January morning, leading me through a thicket of potted plants into his home in the hills near Palo Alto, Calif.

A towering presence with a booming voice, Litton has spent his life battling developers, extractive industries and federal agencies on behalf of iconic Western landscapes. He is among the last of a generation of take-no-prisoners environmental activists. With David Brower and Edward Abbey in the 1960s, he successfully fought the damming of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon and helped kill a Disney resort planned near Sequoia National Park. He campaigned for the creation of Redwood National Park and federal wilderness in the southern Sierra Nevada. Yet Litton remains restless: "I worry about the fate of the Earth. I still have time — and a million things to do."

His imposing frame is stooped with age but he moves with purposeful strides, his cane more annoyance than support. Before I can sit down, he curses his hearing aid, tosses it aside and unleashes an invective against the U.S. Forest Service. "They're so crooked and corrupt it's hard to believe," he fumes, blue eyes flashing beneath unruly eyebrows and a thatch of snowy hair. "What they are doing is not only stupid, it's evil."

What has him pissed off right now is the continued logging of Giant Sequoia National Monument, adjacent to Sequoia National Park in California's Sierra Nevada. Litton and others fought for decades to preserve these trees, among the Earth's largest and oldest. Finally, in 2000 President Clinton created the monument and assigned its management to the Forest Service, which had prioritized timber production there for nearly a century. "That was the kiss of death," Litton mutters.

The Forest Service has continued to log, saying it's harvesting trees that pose a public hazard or to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire. Litton is livid, and so he's working to transfer the monument to the National Park Service, which puts more emphasis on preserving natural resources. Then the sequoias, "these groves



Martin Litton runs a rapid in the dory *Sequoia*. JOHN BLAUSTEIN

as holy as the Sistine Chapel," he says, will get the protection they deserve.

I first met Litton among those sequoias, where he has taken many journalists to promote his cause. Now wobbly and with two artificial knees, he relies more on political connections and the telephone. But his voice still resonates with conviction, and he's convinced 81 U.S. representatives to sign a letter asking President Obama to authorize the transfer. "Martin has never been one to let anything get in his way," says Carl Ross, executive director of Save America's Forests, which is coordinating the effort in Washington, D.C.

Litton's living room is filled with photos of him posing with political dignitaries and maneuvering rapids in a dory boat. He's prone to conversational tangents, from how he met Esther, his wife of 69 years, to encounters with four different U.S. presidents. As he rambles, Esther brings out black-and-white photographs, old magazines and yellowed newspaper articles bearing Litton's byline. A chronology of his career gradually collects on the sofa and floor.

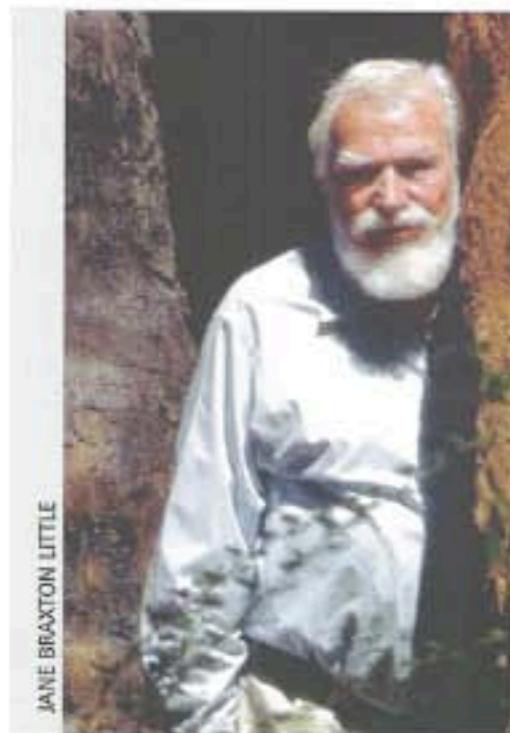
Litton grew up in Gardena, near Los Angeles. His environmental conscience blossomed on early hikes in the southern Sierra. At 18, he wrote a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* denouncing dewatering Mono Lake for L.A.'s expanding population. And in the 1940s, while working in the paper's circulation department, he began freelancing stories about environmental issues.

In 1952, they got the attention of Brower, then executive director of the Sierra Club. Litton's exploration of the Green and Yampa rivers in a small wooden dory became a centerpiece of the club's campaign against two proposed dams in Dinosaur National Monument. The resulting publicity, including the book *This is Dinosaur*, helped persuade Congress to vote against them. "That was the first time to take on the whole nation and

win," Litton says.

The Sierra Club used a similar strategy in 1964, when Litton led a Colorado River dory expedition through the Grand Canyon to galvanize public opposition to additional dams. And a cover story he wrote for *Sunset Magazine*, where he was travel editor from 1954 to 1968, first drew national attention to the destruction of California redwoods. Litton later founded Grand Canyon Dorries, the outfitting business that provided his livelihood for 20 years. Ever the contrarian, as a river runner Litton prefers dories to inflatable rafts. In 2009, at age 92, he broke his own record as the oldest person to run the Grand Canyon in a dory.

Litton has his share of enemies, who call him ego-driven and rigid, difficult and dogged. Even his 60-plus-year affiliation with the Sierra Club had its tempests. It began inauspiciously when he was in high school, and was invited to an L.A. chapter meeting. "The women sat there knitting and talking about the next outing," he recalls. "I didn't see any fire at all." Litton worked with Brower to enflame the group's political temper, warning of one catastrophic threat after another. Even after he left the board of directors in the early 1970s, he continued to demand action on various causes. The organization's bottom-up process relied on the input of local chapters, but Litton ignored all that, says Joe Fontaine, a former Sierra Club



JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

Name Martin Litton

Age 95

Guilty confession "I eat beef."

Studied

Chaucer at UCLA, "another idiotic activity."

On today's environmental movement

"No one wants to pick up the sword and charge."

On rationality

"People who think we should be reasonable send me up the walls in rage."

On relativity

"I was 5 years old when the last California grizzly bear died."

national president: "He'd go straight to the board. He was impatient. Negotiations are not Martin's style."

"Someone had to do something," explains Litton, still sounding irritated.

For all his bombast, Litton exudes a genteel charm. When we step out to lunch, he orders a martini and scrupulously opens doors for every woman we encounter. In the car, he recites Rudyard Kipling — "Something lost beyond the ranges ..." — and we trade couplets from *Alice in Wonderland*. He speaks particularly tenderly of Esther, "All that time she put up with me."

After a day of rabble-rousing recollections, Litton disentangles his long legs from enlarged photos he'd brought out to impress upon me the destruction still being visited upon the sequoia groves. As he escorts me out, his gravelly voice softens. "Try to behave," he says. The moment doesn't last: "That's just something I say. I don't know why. I never did." □