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WASHINGTON, March 29—A two-year fight by militant conservationists to stop the Army Corps of Engineers from building a flood control dam in the remote Red River Gorge of eastern Kentucky has brought the dam's opponents an apparently precedent-breaking victory of esthetic values over the purely practical.

By releasing an exchange of correspondence this week between himself and President Nixon, Senator John Sherman Cooper disclosed that the President had been enlisted on the side of the Kentucky naturalists who have opposed the dam.

Led by the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society and other conservationist groups and individuals, the opponents in 1967 formed a remarkably successful resistance movement against the usually unmovable Corps of Engineers.

Today, a Sierra Club spokesman called the abandonment of the Red River Dam the first case in which the corps had been forced to retreat from an ongoing public works project in the face of purely esthetic objections. An Army spokesman conceded that this was probably the case—and that it was probably not the last.

"This is coming to be a syndrome," a Corps of Engineers spokesman said. "We are getting more and more popular decisions as to what use we are going to put our resources to—conservation or development."

In a "Dear John" letter dated March, the President wrote Mr. Cooper that he had instructed his White House budget aides "to give full consideration" to the views of the Republican

Senator and also to those of Kentucky's Republican Governor, Louie B. Nunn, in allocating Federal dam building funds.

The significance of the Presidential guidance was that both the Senator and the Governor have said that the Army should take its bitterly controversial dam and put it somewhere else, preferably six miles downstream from the first proposed site in the wilds of the Daniel Boone National Forest.

The new location, according to Senator Cooper, would afford the tiny Powell County communities of Clay City and Stanton the same flood protection as the old.

Moreover, it would reduce by more than half the inundation of the Red River Gorge, a coniferous 16-mile-long passage between precipitous cliffs, with giant stone arches and chimneys and great natural bridges, that is prized by conservationists as "the Grand Canyon of the East."

Senator Cooper was originally a sponsor of the \$11-million dam, but he became persuaded that it was not calculated to preserve natural and esthetic values.

A dam at the new location would require new Congressional approval and appropriations, a process that consumed 15 years for the dam now abandoned.

Whether or not the alternate dam is built, the political struggle over the appropriateness of the first proposed site has left its mark on the whole river development process of the Corps of Engineers, its spokesmen conceded.

For one thing, as President Nixon's letter to Senator Cooper noted, the "determined efforts" of conservationists to

preserve the gorge from flooding "has served to keep the corps' proposals under continuous scrutiny."

"Sensitive and consistent attention to resource conservation will be hallmark of this Administration," the President declared.

The Red River Dam controversy has also left deeply bruised feelings in rustic Powell County. In a telephone interview, Dwight Pendleton, president of the pro-dam Red River Valley Flood Control Association and City Attorney of Stanton, Ky., angrily berated "this bunch of damned outsiders who came in here and stopped a dam we've been trying to get since 1953, all for a worthless hollow that is not worth saving."

"This dam thing is just a damn shame," he said. "The mood of Powell County is mighty angry." The politics of Powell County's 4,500 voters is overwhelmingly Democratic, and Mr. Pendleton, president of the Powell County Democratic Club, described that as "the root of our trouble" with a Republican Senator, Governor and national Administration.

In fact, the prospects of Mr. Pendleton's pro-dam forces began to slide precipitously in November, 1967, when the Kentucky Sierra Club persuaded Justice William O. Douglas of the United States Supreme Court to lead a weekend anti-dam protest march through the Red River Gorge.

Senator Cooper, as the ranking Republican on the Public Works Committee and an influential member of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Public Works, was in a strategic position to respond to the outcries of dam critics.