

*Moving
Waters*



the Colorado River & the West

Use At Will

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THE COLORADO RIVER: WHY A HUMANITIES PROJECT?

(Phoenix, AZ) The Colorado River watershed binds and defines the West. By focusing on the river, we can see much that is distinctive about western history and much that is shaping the future of the West. While today every community in the Colorado River watershed is dependent upon the river, many people in these communities are unaware of their historical connections of this 1,700-mile body of water, let alone to each other. This seven-state project invites westerners to examine that taken-for-granted relationship, and see how the Colorado's water historically and currently binds the region together in distinctive ways. The river is also a cultural touchstone for westerners. Many of our paintings, songs, creation stories, and other forms of cultural expression find their genesis in the Colorado River.

Just as the Colorado River is made up of many tributaries, so the story of the Colorado has many contributing elements. The river is a lens through which to see major regional characteristics that define the West. The campaign to control the river and harvest its yield for agriculture, energy, and even recreation, for example, drowned river canyon contours and replaced nature with artifice, a key defining quality of the modern western landscape. Federal ownership and investment made possible the transformation from seasonal flooding to turn-it-on-with-a-switch "plumbing."

Federal assistance also highlights another pervasive western condition - the sometimes perplexing relationship between westerners and Washington, D.C.

Whose river is it?

Many of the technological feats of water storage, diversion, and control happened with scant regard for Native American rights and the consequences for Mexicans downstream. Indian tribes made use of the river floods to irrigate lands since time immemorial. In the 1860s, Congress authorized funds to construct an irrigation canal on the Colorado River Indian Reservation, the first federally funded irrigation project in the U.S. This recognition of senior or prior water rights did not extend into 1922, when the tribes were excluded from the Colorado River Compact.

Most significantly, many enterprises in the West can be traced to the river. The boom and bust cycles of western mining, along with ranching, agriculture, urbanization, recreation, and tourism, are all directly linked to water supplies from the river. The tough environmental, political, economic, and social issues that each of these industries presents cannot be fully appreciated without some knowledge of the Colorado River's history and its role in helping to develop and sustain each industry. Life in the West is tied to water. The project addresses the large questions of quality of life, including conflicts about economic development and land stewardship.

While the future of the West is tied to the river, that future will be influenced by two major considerations: how citizens of the West, and those who depend upon the river for water use, agriculture, recreation and aesthetic experiences come together and democratically ask, discuss, and deliberate their stewardship of this resource; and how the country at large begins to measure "existence value"; how much is it worth to society to know that a once-dammed river is running wild again? As Wallace Stegner asks, "To what extent do we regard the river as a measure of our spiritual health?"

Dividing the waters

The "bill of rights" that allocates the river's resources was created with the 1922 Colorado River Compact, an extremely important but generally unknown compact (except among water managers and their lawyers.) The Compact negotiations speak to us today about how society in the 1920s, as represented by seven commissioners (one each from Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming) and Herbert Hoover, U.S.

Secretary of Commerce, conceived of how to divide the waters. Based on high estimations of total river flow, and of course not taking into account the explosive growth in some of the then less populated states, the Compact allocated water to the Upper and Lower Basins with the dividing point at Lee's Ferry.

Although the Compact was designed to “remove causes of present and future controversies,” it simply set the stage for waging water wars that continue to this day.

The negotiations are remarkable for that they did not consider. The commissioners parsed the waters without Native American representation and with only a hint at Mexico's rights, telling us something about the political and social climate in the early 1920s. They could not have foreseen the acts, compacts, treaties, agreements, contracts, and Supreme Court opinions that would follow based on their division of the waters. No one could have anticipated the full impact of the water diversions on the riparian habitat and indigenous fishes found nowhere else on earth. Nor could anyone have predicted the tremendous post-World War II population explosions in urban centers far from the river that would require ingenious technological solutions to provide them with water.

The River then and tomorrow

By the turn of the 21st century, 25 million people, most living in distant urban centers, now rely on the river. Looking back 80 years on the political climate of the Compact signing and the supplemental agreements, Americans have an opportunity to understand our evolving relation with the river in our own times. In the 19th century, the river determined settlement patterns in the region and people accommodated themselves to the water. By the 1920s, dams and canals along the Colorado River were symbols of a progressive West.

During the first half of the 20th century, dams and diversions “plumbed” the river to support economies of extraction, like mining and agriculture.

That plumbing worked so well it made the river largely invisible to the communities that depend upon it. With plumbing, fresh water flowing to the sea was perceived as “wasted.” It needed to be “captured” and “harnessed” to make the desert bloom. The quest for control peaked with the construction of Hoover Dam in 1935 and through the 1960s, when fourteen other main stem dams were built on the river, and dozens of others on its tributaries.

By the end of the 20th century, many westerners are adding up the cumulative costs of this

thinking and the actions that followed. The costs, physical, social, fiscal and spiritual, reflect our vulnerabilities and have prompted us to contemplate and undertake restoring portions of the river. As Former Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt has said, “Restoration invites us to understand how the natural world functions as a whole. And the best unit to measure that whole, how it is more than the sum of its parts, is the river that runs through us.”

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