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**Enduring Acequias: Wisdom of the Land, Knowledge of the Water
by Juan Estevan Arellano**

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BOOK REVIEWS

Enduring Acequias: Wisdom of the Land, Knowledge of the Water by Juan Estevan Arellano (Univ. of New Mexico Press; 220 pages; 2014)

Juan Estevan Arellano is a native New Mexican whose life, heart, and soul are connected to the acequias, land, and water of New Mexico. While an author's background is not always manifestly relevant to the work he or she creates, it is here. Arellano invites the readers along a journey through his history, through the history of acequias, and through a history of New Mexico. Acequias are a method of irrigation brought to the Southwest by Spanish conquistadores which allow farmers to water their crops in the arid, dry desert of New Mexico. Arellano broaches the subject through a universal lens, reiterating throughout *Enduring Acequias* that while this agricultural tool is well-known in New Mexico, acequias are but one appearance of a civilization's attempt to manage and efficiently use water; such attempts manifest themselves across the globe, spanning much of human history. Arellano aims broad by incorporating linguistic, historical, and agricultural lessons into his book, and largely succeeds in informing the reader of the complexities of acequias in New Mexico.

The author begins by introducing the reader to *agua*, water, and emphasizes the deep respect that we, as a society, should have for this valuable resource. Arellano teaches the reader about the linguistic roots of the words used in New Mexico today and explains their evolution from a pre-Arabic, Yemeni language called Sabaean. After Arabic borrowed these Sabaean words, the Moors carried their words to Spain, and Spanish absorbed these water-related words. Through colonization, the words arrived in the Americas and made their way to the Southwest. Arellano visits regions around the world whose people have mastered the art of manipulating water throughout time: Spain, France, Peru, Yemen, Argentina, Ibiza, and Xochimilco in Mexico. Next, he delves into the unique water rights in New Mexico, developing since the *conquistadores* set foot on this land, and how they dictated much of the land transfers in the area. Finally, Arellano describes the operation of acequias in New Mexico, and how they have allowed this dry, arid region to produce a bountiful cornucopia of fruits, vegetables, and legumes.

At times, the organization of *Enduring Acequias* can be difficult to follow. Arellano provides subdivisions within each chapter, but does not always maintain the overall focus. One point of confusion was the lack of discussion about acequias until the fourth chapter of the book. Arellano provides brief descriptions of acequias prior to the fourth chapter, but a reader unacquainted with acequias is left a little in the dark until the

latter third of the book. While this may be a stylistic choice, because much of what precedes this chapter involves history and context, understanding acequias sooner in the book would allow the reader to connect more and to appreciate the acequias' place in this global scheme.

Arellano writes with a familiar tone, and while this makes for an easy read, he sometimes assumes that the reader possesses the knowledge he has acquired over years of research and study. For example, because the language of the acequias is diverse, Arellano provides translations for the Sabaean and Arabic words he uses. At various points though, he glosses over Spanish words, phrases, and even an entire Spanish passage or two. Many New Mexican readers are familiar with, or even fluent in, Spanish, but not all readers possess these skills. Sometimes, the meaning is difficult to translate; however, Arellano uses these words because they are vital to understanding his deeply personal interactions with the *agua y tierra* (water and land), and it is a shame that some readers miss out. Lastly, Arellano refers to geographic locations and phenomenon that he later spends a subchapter on, but that readers may not be familiar with outright. In particular, he mentions the *chinampas* in Xochimilco several times, but without personal knowledge (or until the last subchapter of chapter one), a reader may have no idea that these were agricultural devices employed by the Aztecs in pre-Columbian Mexico and that they relate to the wonders of Incan terracing in Peru.

Arellano is knowledgeable and passionate, and his voice is direct and true throughout the book. He has no qualms about making his sociocultural beliefs known. For Arellano, water is a public resource, which should never be a commodity. He takes time to point out that civilizations have crumbled when they lose sight of maintaining their knowledge of water and respect for the land. Arellano cautions readers and New Mexicans that a failure to invest in the traditions of the land will bring about the same demise. He stresses how important it is for New Mexicans to remain firm in their dedication to the acequias, even at the risk of sparking legal battles for easements with newly-arrived landowners who do not understand the centuries-long importance of the acequias in New Mexico. Because of current global battles for access to water and the fight to keep it a public good, *Enduring Acequias* could benefit from a broader discussion of these current sociopolitical challenges. Arellano is certainly well-versed in the topic and qualified to contribute to this international discussion.

Arellano situates this lesson on acequias in time and on a map so that readers, whether from the legal community, water community, natural resources community, or New Mexican community, may understand where they fit. He emphasizes the unique qualities of New

Mexico's version of water management, while simultaneously reminding readers that we are simply part of a larger story, one that we must work to keep alive if we hope to maintain our way of life.

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