



Winter 2017

Water is for Fighting Over: And Other Myths about Water in the West, by John Fleck

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Recommended Citation

Selena Sauer, *Water is for Fighting Over: And Other Myths about Water in the West, by John Fleck*, 57 Nat. Resources J. 325 (2017).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol57/iss1/12>

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Water is for Fighting Over and Other Myths about Water in the West by John Fleck (Island Press, 264 pages; 2016)

What do cows, lettuce fields, the Bellagio fountains, the Arizona Navy, and beaver have in common? They are all “characters” in John Fleck’s beautifully spun non-fiction tale of the Lower Colorado River Basin’s path to water security. With compellingly simple prose, John Fleck takes us on a stroll down that path through the interactions and events that have shaped the complex Law of the River. He leaves us, having shed many stuffy layers of perception, to rest on the river bank envisioning a future of continuing water security and increasing collaboration throughout the Basin. A future where people use less water, yet are more prosperous. Where states, cities, and other actors harmoniously preserve water for the river’s natural ecosystems. Where instead of conflict over a seemingly dwindling resource, there is cooperation and problem-solving. Somewhere along the path, readers begin to realize that the future is actually now.

Water is for Fighting Over is set in the Lower Colorado River Basin States of California, Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico and south of the border in Mexico. The Colorado River Compact provides the lower basin states with approximately half of the Colorado River’s water; California’s lettuce fields and urban populations receive the lion’s share. Mexico receives a smaller allocation through treaty, and across the Arizona-Mexico border, the Rio Colorado once flowed through a delta teeming with beaver and other wildlife before pouring into the Gulf of California. Now, the majority of Mexico’s water is diverted to the Mexicali valley for irrigation. Further north in the U.S., the book details a history of dam building and diversions that have provided the infrastructure to turn the desert into productive farmland and helped create the thriving urban centers of the Southwest.

With this book, Mr. Fleck employs the dynamic of storytelling to demonstrate that cooperative goals can be met when individuals unite to solve problems. This stands in contrast to his previous work as a journalist for the Albuquerque Journal, where Fleck’s coverage of water issues admittedly played into many of the myths involving water scarcity and conflict in the Southwest this book succeeds in debunking. More recently, Fleck has shared his passion with students at the University of New Mexico as an adjunct professor, and is currently Director of the university’s Water Resources Program. Over the years, Fleck came to know many of the folks instrumental to the further evolution and development of the Law of the River. His background and the relationships he has formed provide a treasure trove of insight into the dynamics of the Lower Colorado River Basin.

Water is for Fighting Over provides readers the inside scoop on the Colorado River Basin’s history and politics. A major focus of Fleck’s book is a network of Colorado River water management professionals making positive progress in the face of adversity. It is this Network, a force of human capital cooperating out of a desire for the common good and out of necessity, Fleck argues, that is responsible for re-imagining the management of the Colorado River’s water. The book outlines many of the Network’s achievements that are based on relationships and problem-solving. These collaborations disprove myths about the need to fight over every last drop of water and provide an example of

how ingenuity and positivity can reverberate throughout the Basin, even as it is beset by increasing strains like climate change.

It may be hard to imagine how low-value alfalfa fields grown to feed cows slated for the dinner table could benefit the Basin, but turning the traditional notion of a resource consuming practice around, Fleck reframes the crop as a flexible tool farmers can use while they adapt to changing conditions. Farmers growing alfalfa have the option to continue growing it while irrigating less, since the crop does not wither away from lack of irrigation, only decreases in yield. Eventually alfalfa farmers may choose to grow different crops, or fallow their fields and sell their portion of water to other users. These adaptive strategies allow farmers to continue to make a livelihood, while changing their water-use practices over time. Many farmers in the Imperial Valley of California have already made the switch from low-value crops like alfalfa to high-value lettuce and vegetable crops, conserving more water through state-of-the-art irrigation systems.

Another positive water conservation story, believe it or not, is Las Vegas. The city cultivates an image of excess, but its water conservation strategies, along with those of other large cities in the Southwest, have been quite successful. First, what about those Bellagio fountains? That is brackish groundwater, not Colorado River water. Second, while the city's population has constantly increased, its water use has decreased thanks to the ingenuity and foresight of its water managers. The same goes for Phoenix, although Fleck's enthusiasm has its limits when telling the tale of Arizona's history of self-defeating tactics to try to obtain more Colorado River water, describing the state as "its own worst enemy." But even when relating unpleasant incidents that have occurred in the shaping of the Law of the River, Fleck's ability to bring out the pettiness and comedy inherent in the conflict leaves the reader with little doubt that future conflagrations can be put out with less water applied more collaboratively.

Take for example when, in 1934, Arizona decided to deploy its national guard on the Colorado River in a one boat armada, to "prevent" California from constructing the Parker Dam. In a happy ending, Parker Dam, a diversion point for the aqueduct that carries Colorado River water to the Los Angeles Basin, was built without bloodshed. This portrayal of Arizona's brief foray into naval operations emphasizes with high comedy and tragedy that obstructionist tactics have not and will not help states gain greater leverage on water resources in the Colorado River Basin.

This review touches on only a few of the stories and lessons Fleck shares in *Water is for Fighting Over*, but my favorite story is about the Colorado River's delta, and the beaver who returned to it when the water returned. The book's overarching theme is rooted in the story of the river, beginning its journey as snowpack runoff in the Colorado Rockies and, once again in 2014, ending its journey inundating its long-forsaken delta at the Gulf of California. The Minute 319 environmental pulse flow resulted from a formal agreement between the U.S. and Mexico that was fostered by the network and was heralded by environmental attorney Robert Culp as the "first time two nations had used water to provide environmental flows across an international boundary." It extended the Colorado River Basin's contemporary management boundaries to include long-excluded Basin stakeholders like environmentalists, Mexicans, and beaver. To Fleck, seeing

the river flowing through the delta once again is proof that past Colorado River Basin conundrums can be overcome when misbegotten myths are replaced with human capital, collaboration, and ingenuity. I recommend this book as an inspirational and refreshing read for Colorado Basin aficionados and ordinary water users alike.

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