



Spring 2015

Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis by David Groenfelt

Robin James

Recommended Citation

Robin James, *Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis by David Groenfelt*, 55 NAT. RES. J. 485 (2015).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol55/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis by David Groenfeldt (Routledge; 216 pages; 2013)

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” As David Groenfeldt puts it in his book, *Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis*, the saying does not imply that there is anything wrong with good intentions, but rather that intentions alone are not enough. In his in-depth look at the ethics of water, Groenfeldt asks us to question the ethics behind the decisions being made with regard to water today and suggests that this awareness will start the implementation of the change we all know is necessary. Groenfeldt states that the current water shortage facing the world is not due to a lack of good intentions, ideas, or concepts, but rather a lack of awareness of the ethics that affect these decisions.

Groenfeldt is the founder and director of the Water-Culture Institute in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which promotes the sustainable management of water systems through research, activism, training, and mediation.¹ Groenfeldt is also an adjunct professor in the Anthropology Department at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, has worked internationally, and has directed a watershed NGO in New Mexico.

In his book, Groenfeldt offers an in depth analysis of different policies that have surrounded decisions regarding water throughout the years and suggests underlying ethics that may support these same decisions—both locally and internationally. Groenfeldt walks the reader through the ethics of irrigation, urban and domestic water use, industry use, governance, and indigenous beliefs about water. He focuses quite a bit of time on New Mexico and other parts of the western region.

Groenfeldt offers a fresh perspective and way of thinking about common ideas regarding water scarcity and misuse. He states that by reevaluating the underlying ethics in every decision made, and incorporating the ethics of everyone involved in each of these decisions, change may begin to take place. Groenfeldt suggests that ethics are already in place in most water decisions, and that our job is to replace these ethics with new ones. He suggests that the underlying ethics currently in place came from old school thinking or values that do not reflect our society’s current principles, and by simply creating an awareness of this we can begin to make change. Groenfeldt states that getting the ethics right first is crucial to making actual change for the future.

1. WATER CULTURE INSTITUTE, <http://www.waterculture.org> (last visited Apr. 19, 2015).

While the focus of this book is clearly a call for awareness, Groenfeldt also devotes a good portion of the book to explaining different views of water, analyzing different cultures, and explaining to the reader how water is used in different contexts. Groenfeldt devotes an entire chapter to the views of Indigenous People on water and discusses the duty that others have to learn from these views. Groenfeldt proposes the possibility that if people everywhere were to become advanced in global concepts dealing with water, society's views could actually align with the worldviews of Indigenous People, respecting water for what it is and not viewing it as simply something that is society's to take.

Groenfeldt concludes with suggestions for what different people can do to begin making this change. Groenfeldt states, "Not to decide is to decide," a phrase attributed to Abraham Lincoln. In saying this, Groenfeldt stresses that not exploring the ethical content of a course of action is actually an ethical decision in and of itself, and not the one we should be making.

While this fresh perspective is inspiring, actually implementing some of these things may still seem daunting to the average reader. As stated, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," and I'm not sure this book leaves the average reader with anything more than just that. However, Groenfeldt does state the goal of this book is to promote ethics awareness and the application of this ethical analysis to water decisions. If nothing more, it certainly accomplishes this goal. Making people aware of the ethics that go into water decisions and changing the way we view our choices about water, as ethical decisions and not technical decisions that people feel they have no control over, could start a change from the ground up—if people are willing to take the initiative. The overall message, that an awareness of ethics can contribute to better decisions about water management and governance and potentially solve the water crisis, is articulated very well.

Overall, this book is a very well written, easy read that would be understandable to people of all backgrounds. Groenfeldt calls us to ask ourselves what our own ethical standards are first, and this book definitely left me doing this. I would suggest that everyone read this book because it offers a new, understandable perspective on the underlying ethical issues within our own water management systems and brings to the forefront concern for the change in current water management that we all know is necessary.

Robin James
Class of 2016

University of New Mexico School of Law