



Spring 2010

## Place-Based Conservation and Urban Waterways: Watershed Activism in the Bottom of the Basin

Anne Taufen Wessells

### Recommended Citation

Anne T. Wessells, *Place-Based Conservation and Urban Waterways: Watershed Activism in the Bottom of the Basin*, 50 Nat. Resources J. 539 (2010).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol50/iss2/14>

This Article 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 [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu), [lsloane@salud.unm.edu](mailto:lsloane@salud.unm.edu), [sahrk@unm.edu](mailto:sahrk@unm.edu).

ANNE TAUFEN WESSELLS\*

# Place-Based Conservation and Urban Waterways: Watershed Activism in the Bottom of the Basin

## ABSTRACT

*Decentralized management and citizen participation have been central tenets of water governance reform over the last two decades. However, representation and process in the bottom of the bottom-up transformation of urban watershed management too often replicate the values of the top-down administration it was meant to replace: economic efficiency and rational utilitarianism as understood by well-resourced political elites. This article presents an argument for building the capacity to accomplish equity in urban watershed management via experiential, symbolic, and identity-based means of social engagement. The watershed movement is spurred on by place-based activism, motivated by geographically rooted identification with a watershed's intrinsic value and worth. If equity matters in urban watershed management, then it matters profoundly who has the opportunity to form place-based relationships with urban waterways and their riverbanks and lakeshores. Drawing on examples from fieldwork in Los Angeles, this article argues that broadening the base and political power of urban watershed activism—and thus the equity of decentralized modes of urban watershed management—will rely upon diversifying the ranks of urban citizens who are deeply place-attached to the watershed.*

## INTRODUCTION

Water governance has undergone significant reform over the last several decades.<sup>1</sup> One important aspect of this reform is the gradual,

---

\* Assistant Professor, Urban Studies Program, University of Washington, Tacoma; atw5@uw.edu. This research was conducted during graduate study at the University of California, Irvine, and supported by a grant from the National Institutes for Water Resources and the U.S. Geological Survey, 2004–2006, “Institutional Re-arrangements: Forging ‘Smart Use’ Water Policy Coalitions at the Intersection of Geo-technical Engineering with Urban Open Space,” P.I. Helen Ingram, Grant #2004CA110G. The author thanks the participants in the 2009 symposium, “As If Equity Mattered,” for their generous and helpful comments.

1. See Helen Ingram, John M. Whiteley & Richard Perry, *The Importance of Equity and Limits of Efficiency in Water Resources*, in *WATER, PLACE AND EQUITY 1* (Whiteley et al. eds., 2008), for an overview.

ongoing shift from narrow jurisdictional administration of water districts and functions to a more transboundary, multiuse, collaborative model of watershed management.<sup>2</sup> Ideally, the new model of watershed management is both decentralized and participatory: It enables an integrated, “bottom-up” mode of democratic water governance rather than the isolated, technocratic, “top-down” water agencies of the recent modern era.

Many environmental researchers, activists, practitioners, and policy scholars have embraced watershed management as an important step forward in bioregional science and collaborative governance.<sup>3</sup> However, concerns about its claims of improved regional equity have also begun to emerge. For instance, in a study of place-based groups in metropolitan Portland, Oregon, Larson and Lach find watershed organizations populated by participants with strikingly similar demographic and attitudinal characteristics.<sup>4</sup> In an evaluation of storm water management policies in Los Angeles, California, Kamieniecki and Below argue that wealthy coastal residents are able to gain disproportionate water quality benefits through a decentralized, participatory process which nevertheless involves and taxes citizens throughout the greater metropolitan region.<sup>5</sup> Such examples call into question the utilitarian equity of watershed management reforms through ideals of both procedural diversity (is there broad local representation among stakeholders in the management process?) and equitable, consequentialist outcomes (who wins, who loses, and who pays?).

In a related strain of evaluative research, intense social place attachment and the bioregional identity values of waterscapes are shown to fuel effective participation in decentralized water governance beyond the prediction of classic utilitarian metrics.<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon derives

---

2. See REFLECTIONS ON WATER: NEW APPROACHES TO TRANSBOUNDARY CONFLICT AND COOPERATION (Joachim Blatter & Helen Ingram eds., 2001); SWIMMING UPSTREAM: COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES TO WATERSHED MANAGEMENT (Paul A. Sabatier et al. eds., 2005).

3. See WATERSHED MANAGEMENT: BALANCING SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE (Robert J. Naiman ed., 1994); ISOBEL W. HEATHCOTE, INTEGRATED WATERSHED MANAGEMENT: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES (1998); Mark Lubell et al., *Watershed Partnerships and the Emergence of Collective Action Institutions*, 46 AM. J. POL. SCI. 48–163 (2002); Sabatier et al., *supra* note 2.

4. Kelli Larson & Denise Lach, *Participants and Non-Participants of Place-Based Groups: An Assessment of Attitudes and Implications for Public Participation in Water Resource Management*, 88 J. ENVTL. MGMT. 817–30 (2008); see also Kelli Larson & Denise Lach, *Equity in Urban Water Governance Through Participatory, Place-Based Approaches*, 50 NAT. RESOURCES J. 407 (2010).

5. Sheldon Kamieniecki & Amy Below, *Ethical Issues in Storm Water Policy Implementation*, in WATER, PLACE & EQUITY, *supra* note 1, at 69.

6. Joachim Blatter, *Lessons from Lake Constance: Ideas, Institutions, and Advocacy Coalitions*, in REFLECTIONS ON WATER, *supra* note 2, at 89; John T. Woolley et al., *The California*

from the “intrinsic” value of water—its ability to hold symbolic, cultural, lifestyle, and spiritual meanings, binding people into political communities.<sup>7</sup>

This article considers the potential of such intrinsic, place-based values for improving both procedural and consequentialist equity in urban watershed management. Based on field research in Los Angeles, California, I present two instances where previously marginalized stakeholder groups used their symbolic place attachments to significantly change the dynamic and outcome of local watershed management processes. While the intrinsic valuation of waterscapes cannot contend immediately or directly with more utilitarian water values, I argue that it *can* effectively support the effective politicization of new watershed stakeholders, and thus create diversification and more equitable outcomes in urban watershed management processes.

The article proceeds in four additional sections. First, the conceptual framework is introduced, integrating ideas of equity, values, place, and power. Second, I present case data from Los Angeles, California. Following brief notes on research methodology and context, I focus on two examples of new participant-stakeholders becoming involved with and effective within urban watershed management processes. The third section discusses the theoretical and practical implications of these examples, namely how shared, intrinsic place values can build political capacity to transform the process and outcomes of urban watershed management. Finally, I conclude with a call to invest in and cultivate shared, intrinsic values of water among diverse citizens, as the starting point for more equitable outcomes in urban watershed management.

## I. EQUITY, VALUES, PLACE, AND POWER

Utilitarian notions of water equity are grounded in an economic, pragmatic orientation that seeks to apply universal measures and methods of distribution to all goods and values. In order for water resources to be used, enjoyed, or allocated in a particular way, according to such a calculus, the value of the water must be demonstrably measured and compared favorably among other potential uses, enjoyments, and allocations. Understanding water equity in this way might enable important gains between different stakeholders. For instance, if a poor farmer is

---

*Watershed Movement: Science and the Politics of Place*, 42 NAT. RESOURCES J. 133–83 (2002); Thomas Clay Arnold, *The San Luis Valley and the Moral Economy of Water*, in WATER, PLACE & EQUITY, *supra* note 1, at 37.

7. Joachim Blatter, Helen Ingram & Suzanne Lorton Levesque, *Expanding Perspectives on Transboundary Water*, in REFLECTIONS ON WATER, *supra* note 2, at 31; Ingram et al., *supra* note 1.

able to quantify the value of a water resource to their agricultural and economic subsistence and successfully compete on such terms over and against claims on the same resource made by more-wealthy hydropower or urban residential users (as an example), then important objectives of equity in water resource governance—access to the political process and redistributive outcomes that support those most in need—have been met. However, water resource governance is so deeply informed by utilitarian logic that this outcome is not usual. That is, when water use and allocation decisions are made, they are made in highly bureaucratic settings, where aggregate costs and benefits are established through measures that can be quantified, and the stakeholders involved in decision-making are generally well-versed in the rules of the game. In all likelihood, if the poor farmer somehow manages to get to the table, too often he will not have the solidarity, experience, or economic impact reports needed to contend successfully in the governance battle for use of and access to limited water resources.

For this reason, utilitarian notions of water equity do not go far enough. They focus exclusively on the political process and economic outcomes of water resource governance when what is needed are additional ways of building capacity, solidarity, and evaluative force among those with fewer material and organizational resources. A broadened conception of equity is called for, including less rationalistic notions that focus on the intrinsic and symbolic meanings that water holds for some people and the degree to which those values are taken into account in water resource governance.<sup>8</sup> This section will discuss the fractured relationship between process and outcome measures of utilitarian equity, as discussed above, and propose a theoretical framework in which intrinsic, social-ecological values can provide a holistic, democratic corrective.

Definitions of equity are bound by time and place. Equity in water resource governance involves a historical understanding of the social-ecological context in which water is situated, both materially and symbolically. Equity is a “complex and protean idea,” which nevertheless is “a necessary condition for a just society.”<sup>9</sup> When equity is defined in purely utilitarian terms, its complexity is lost and its pursuit will consistently fall short of fairness and justice ideals. Regardless of whether we are measuring processes or outcomes in Kamieniecki’s and Below’s terms of, “whether everyone is afforded equal opportunity to affect policy decisions” and “whether benefits are dispersed within society,” or in

---

8. See, e.g., Ingram et al., *supra* note 1.

9. See *id.* at 8.

Wilder's terms of, "political equity" and "economic equity," respectively<sup>10</sup>—equity in water resource governance is sorely lacking.

Better, more inclusive process should lead to more equitable results in water governance. This relationship is represented in Figure 1 (below) by the solid arrow. The institutionalization of participatory mechanisms in water governance—stakeholder groups, watershed councils, public comment, and policy review, for instance—is intended to facilitate more broad-based input to water resource policy, which in turn should result in decisions that reflect predominant citizen values. Unfortunately this is often not the case. In practice, water policy outcomes continue to favor established economic elites, even when decentralized, participatory institutions exist.<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon is represented in Figure 1 by the broken arrow, suggesting that apparent procedural reforms may have little or no relationship to increased equity in policy outcomes if the values and representation that are privileged by the new process reflect predominant patterns of inequity in society and government. Despite the growth of collaborative institutional arrangements, inequitable outcomes in water resource management can still be "traced to asymmetries and imbalances of political as well as economic power."<sup>12</sup>

Procedural reform is necessary for improved equity in water resource governance, enabling public deliberation for various constituencies and management alternatives. However, procedural reform is often not sufficient to overcome existing inequities in political and economic power. In order to build political power among constituencies who are either not included in preliminary procedural reforms and/or are not effective in their "ability to marshal support in authoritative venues such as the branches and levels of government and media, [where it] is often decisive,"<sup>13</sup> the proposed theoretical model suggests that the cultivation of commonly held, intrinsic waterscape values can play a transformative role.

Scholars have shown that communities in particular places develop profound identity meanings through their shared relationship to their watershed and water resources. For example, F. Lee Brown and Helen Ingram illustrate the significance of the historic *acequia* system for rural Hispanics and Native Americans in the desert Southwest beyond

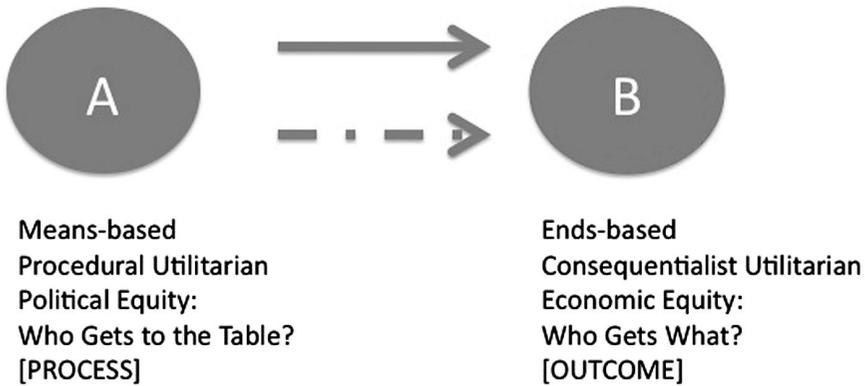
---

10. Kamieniecki & Below, *supra* note 5, at 87; Margaret Wilder, *Equity and Water in Mexico's Changing Institutional Landscape*, in *WATER, PLACE & EQUITY*, *supra* note 1, at 95, 95–96.

11. See Kamieniecki & Below, *supra* note 5; Wilder, *supra* note 10; Maria Carmen Lemos, *Whose Water Is It Anyway? Water Management, Knowledge and Equity in Northeast Brazil*, in *WATER, PLACE & EQUITY*, *supra* note 1, at 249.

12. Ingram et al., *supra* note 1, at 17.

13. *Id.* at 17.

**Figure 1: Equity as process, equity as outcome?**

its immediate economic value as a conduit of water: The water ditches functioned to organize social interaction and labor, and thus bound together a community of citizens.<sup>14</sup> Environmental historian Richard White exposes the central social role of the Columbia River: “the river demanded energy to match its energy, and this shaped and revealed the organization of work. . . [in] numerous acts of calculation, conflict, abuse and cooperation . . . a social order became transparent.”<sup>15</sup> And Richard Warren Perry reminds us that our treasured accounts of the first agricultural settlements “are all *regional* stories in which the development of specific civilizations is rooted in specific riverine regional environments”: The identification with a social-ecological region predates by millennia the emergence of the nation-state construct as a political identity and organizing force.<sup>16</sup> Water enables and orders social organization.

Intrinsic place and activity based water values can also galvanize and sustain coherent political communities. Discussing the trans-boundary governance of central Europe’s Lake Constance, a body of water with shoreline in three countries, Blatter describes the emergence of a “postmodern cross-border environmental politics,” relying on policy networks organized around regional lifestyle and identity values rather than nation-states and their agencies or interests.<sup>17</sup> In their study of the watershed movement in California, Woolley, McGinnis, and Kellner point out that it is “not a reflection of any particular level of government

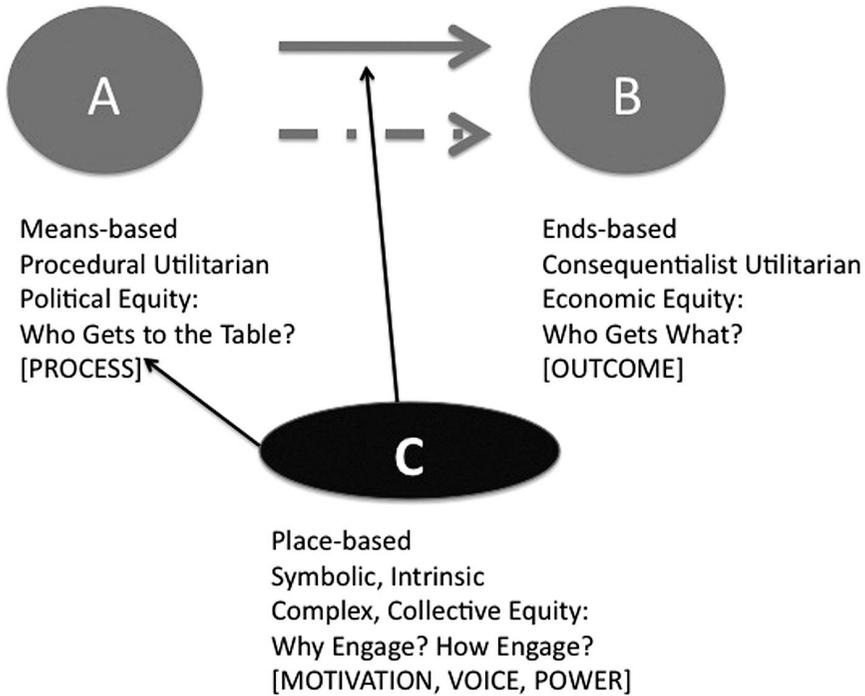
14. F. LEE BROWN & HELEN M. INGRAM, *WATER AND POVERTY IN THE SOUTHWEST* (1987).

15. RICHARD WHITE, *THE ORGANIC MACHINE: THE REMAKING OF THE COLUMBIA RIVER* 13 (1996).

16. Richard Perry, *Perspectives from the Districts of Water and Power: A Report on Flows*, in *REFLECTIONS ON WATER*, *supra* note 2, at 297.

17. Blatter, *supra* note 6, at 89.

**Figure 2: Conceptualizing equity to complement the utilitarian model.**



or a product of an agency program.”<sup>18</sup> Rather, activists are characterized by “geographical rootedness” and “ecocentric values,” and connected to “specific sets of interests, communities, and plant and animal species” in linkages that “are both socially and ecologically derived.”<sup>19</sup> Political participation in the watershed movement is driven by shared, place-based values. Similarly, Arnold elucidates the “moral economy of water” in Colorado’s San Luis Valley, where a well-established, yet relatively less wealthy community organized around water as a social good and successfully resisted water transfers to the rapidly growing and relatively more wealthy Front Range metropolitan area of the state.<sup>20</sup>

In the three examples above, the social meanings that grow out of a particular community’s relationship to its water and watershed drive politicization and institutionalization. In this way, the rational-utilitarian

18. Woolley et al., *supra* note 6, at 144, 181.

19. *Id.*

20. Arnold, *supra* note 6, at 37.

model of equity is complemented by an additional, crucial mode of water resource valuation. These extra-utilitarian, shared, intrinsic meanings of water can demonstrably expand the constituencies included in water governance processes, and strengthen the resourcefulness with which they press their claims. This expanded conceptualization is represented in Figure 2 (above). This expanded model of equity in water resource governance helps to explain case data in watershed management from Los Angeles.

## II. URBAN WATERSHED MANAGEMENT IN LOS ANGELES

Similar to many regions around the country and the world, water resource agencies in metropolitan Los Angeles have been moving over the last 15 years toward a model of collaborative watershed management. This movement is partially driven by the decentralization and cooperation rationales that are familiar across various sectors of government and natural resource management: “wicked” policy problems, policy and administrative “silos,” limited administrative resources, and growing distrust between government and citizens.<sup>21</sup>

However, collaborative watershed management has also been driven in greater Los Angeles by the emergence and political activity of regional citizen groups. Composed of local residents and activists who care deeply about the use and meaning of the Los Angeles River watershed, these groups have been crucial in expanding the social meaning of regional water resources. Two of these groups—Friends of the Los Angeles River, and the Anahuak Youth Soccer Association—illustrate very clearly that citizens who have historically been left out of water resource governance decisions can organize and mobilize through intrinsic, place-based claims to dramatically affect the process and outcomes of watershed management.

The following examples come from field data collected over a period of almost four years, stretching from 2002 to 2006. It is part of a larger research project examining the social and technical construction of urban waterfront redevelopment initiatives in four metropolitan areas.<sup>22</sup>

---

21. See BARBARA GRAY, *COLLABORATING: FINDING COMMON GROUND FOR MULTI-PARTY PROBLEMS* (1989); ROBERT AGRANOFF & MICHAEL MCGUIRE, *COLLABORATIVE PUBLIC MANAGEMENT: NEW STRATEGIES FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS* 24 (2003); Nancy Roberts, *Public Deliberation in an Age of Direct Citizen Participation*, 34 *AM. REV. PUB. ADMIN.* 315–53 (2004); BARBARA CROSBY & JOHN BRYSON, *LEADERSHIP FOR THE COMMON GOOD: TACKLING PUBLIC PROBLEMS IN A SHARED POWER WORLD* 218–19 (2005).

22. Anne Taufen Wessells, *Constructing Watershed Parks: Actor-Networks and Collaborative Governance in Four U.S. Metropolitan Areas* (2007) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Irvine) (on file with the University of California Library).

Data collection included media surveys, review of project-planning documentation and stakeholder analysis; semi-structured interviews with activists, agency officials, and NGO professionals; and ongoing participant observation in the field in Los Angeles during the spring, summer, and fall of 2005. Interpretation was supported by ATLAS.ti software for qualitative data, enabling the coding and analysis of text sources, recorded interviews, and transcribed field notes.

The mosaic of citizen groups involved in Los Angeles area watershed management initiatives includes dozens of cause- and place-based organizations. Below, I describe in detail the role of two groups—Friends of the Los Angeles River and the Anahuak Youth Soccer Association<sup>23</sup>—that (a) represent citizens who have historically been marginalized in local water resource decisions, and (b) have had a clear and dramatic impact on the structure and/or outcomes of decision-making processes. I focus on these groups not because they are the most important citizen groups in Los Angeles watershed management, nor because they are the only groups helping to bring about greater equity in Los Angeles watershed management decisions. Rather, they are emblematic of a phenomenon where alternative, urban, grassroots activism successfully infiltrates and transforms a well-established water resources/urban development regime.

#### A. Friends of the Los Angeles River

Today, Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) operates as a well-established, regional, nonprofit environmental organization “whose mission is to protect and restore the natural and historic heritage of the Los Angeles River and its riparian habitat through inclusive planning, education, and wise stewardship.”<sup>24</sup> With a paid staff, a board of directors, newsletters, dues-paying members, and a full slate of ongoing programs and events, FoLAR undoubtedly qualifies as an “institutionalized watershed organization.”<sup>25</sup> However, at its inception in 1985, it was a performance art piece staged by four friends:

[W]e used a pair of wirecutters to slice through the L.A. County Dept. of Public Works’ fence, then we clambered down the concrete walls into the concrete channel of the Los Angeles River . . . The air around us was in an unholy din. A Southern Pacific freight train rumbled up the tracks on one

---

23. General information about these organizations can be found at their websites, <http://www.folar.org> and <http://www.anahuak.org>, respectively.

24. About FoLAR, [http://folar.org/?page\\_id=84](http://folar.org/?page_id=84) (last visited Sept. 7, 2010).

25. Woolley et al., *supra* note 6.

bank. A Santa Fe freight rumbled down the tracks on the other. Traffic on two freeway bridges and the Riverside Drive bridge roared by. The odor was industrial. The scene was latter-day urban hell . . . when we asked the river if we could speak for it in the human realm we didn't hear it say no; and that was how Friends of the Los Angeles River began.<sup>26</sup>

The scene is a palimpsest of urban dystopia and Deep Ecology:<sup>27</sup> a merry band of displaced artist-actors seeking conversation with their silent, eternally placed, nonhuman co-star. The performance was also taken to a more audience-friendly venue, and staged at the Wallenboyd Theater in the same year. The central tension of the piece—individuals seeking dialogue and creative unity with something larger than themselves—has persisted in FoLAR's identity and helps to account for the organization's appeal in a famously placeless city.

FoLAR was incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1986.<sup>28</sup> It led the public outcry against a 1989 proposal to turn the concrete-lined riverbed into yet another Los Angeles freeway. In the early 1990s, FoLAR partnered with the local chapter of the American Institutes of Architects (AIA) and with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works in separate initiatives to study potential uses for a brownfield railroad site, Taylor Yard, along the river in central Los Angeles. Over the last two decades, FoLAR has sponsored or co-sponsored dozens of design charrettes, river project outreach initiatives, feasibility studies, habitat and water conservation education programs, and annual river clean-up events.

In 1995, FoLAR spearheaded a lawsuit to prevent the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and Los Angeles County Public Works from further reinforcing and raising the walls of the river's concrete mouth in Long Beach. The flood control project went forward, but the Los Angeles Superior Court required the County and the Corps to undertake a stakeholder-based, watershed-wide planning initiative. This planning group, convened to create the 1996 Los Angeles River Master Plan, would persist to become the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council. The institutional movement towards urban watershed management

---

26. Lewis MacAdams, *Restoring the Los Angeles River: A Forty-Year Art Project*, 85 *WHOLE EARTH REV.* 62, 62 (1995).

27. See BILL DEVAL & GEORGE SESSIONS, *DEEP ECOLOGY: LIVING AS IF NATURE MATTERED* (1985) (developing the idea of the intrinsic worth of the natural environment).

28. See ROBERT GOTTLIEB, *REINVENTING LOS ANGELES: NATURE AND COMMUNITY IN THE GLOBAL CITY* (2007); See BLAKE GUMPRECHT, *THE LOS ANGELES RIVER: ITS LIFE, DEATH, AND POSSIBLE REBIRTH* (1999).

in greater Los Angeles owes a great deal to FoLAR and its environmental vision, legal tactics, and organizational persistence.

Arguably, however, FoLAR is and has always been an arts organization. Policy analyses struggle to capture the significance of the social and cultural creativity that has been at the center of FoLAR's ethic from its inception. Lewis MacAdams, FoLAR's founder, is a poet.<sup>29</sup> When MacAdams begins to talk to people about the river, he does not ask them to go to a stakeholder meeting, read up on urban water issues, join a coalition, or write a check. He tells them to go to the river. To physically, personally experience the place: its topography, its smells, its sounds, and implicitly, its accessibility (or lack thereof) and its relationship to all of the other places where we spend our time (cars, offices, homes, gyms, stores, and so on). MacAdams himself, and FoLAR as an organization, advocate for a personal, interpersonal, lived, felt relationship to the river and its watershed.

The FoLAR initiative that is most frequent and consistent, among its dozens of watershed programs and partnerships, is its ongoing series of river walks. The river walks introduce Los Angeles citizens to the watercourse that runs through their city. Typically scheduled to last for a few hours on a Saturday morning, these excursions accomplish what cannot happen on a personal computer or at a watershed council meeting. Participants meet at a scheduled time and place to explore a particular stretch of the river. Tour leaders tell the walkers about the river's history, its ecology and the use and conflicts that surround particular sites along its banks. They are adept at maneuvering through unmarked entrances to the river channel, back through the streets where the river cannot be traversed and straight to the places where the river is undeniably acting like a river: supporting fish and plant life, luring birds, or making the trickling sound that comes from wending its way through brush, pebbles, and natural detritus along the riverbed.

To characterize FoLAR as an arts organization may seem surprising given its obvious and deliberate role in local water resource politics and policy. However, FoLAR's most prominent activists, the nonprofit's programming, and its self-presentation on the Internet and in printed materials make clear that the artistic impulse to distill and enable cultural experience are at the core of its organizational mission. FoLAR's new website welcomes visitors with a montage of some of the river's extraordinary bridges: a paradoxical paean to the early twentieth-century era of city-building, with clear respect for the strength and elegance of the spans that accompanied the encasement of the beloved river. The nonprofit's programs frequently emphasize the role of the river in film,

---

29. See, e.g., LEWIS MACADAMS, *THE RIVER: BOOKS ONE, TWO AND THREE* (2007).

art, and the city's literary history. FoLAR celebrates urban creativity as thoroughly as it emphasizes the natural environment. As such, the organization has attracted and given voice to an urban, place-bound constituency that has traditionally been more marginalized than classic wilderness-centered environmentalists.

Two frequent river walk leaders have been fine artist Joe Linton and environmental writer Jennifer Price. Both artist-activists take an understated, place-based, visceral approach to their work for FoLAR and reject the eco-activist's tendency to wish the city away in the name of environmental restoration. Their professional purpose, as evidenced in their published products as well as their work as river guides, is to make manifest the ability for individuals to connect with urban nature, as well as with other people.<sup>30</sup> Lewis MacAdams has called FoLAR "a forty-year art project,"<sup>31</sup> suggesting that urban watershed management is less an exercise in near-term structural governance reform than a long-term call to social-ecological creativity for the watershed's artist-citizens.

### B. Anahuak Youth Soccer Association

Like FoLAR, the Anahuak Youth Soccer Association (AYSA) did not start with the intention of becoming engaged in city, county, and state water politics, or watershed management reform.<sup>32</sup> AYSA is a soccer league. It started in northeast Los Angeles in the mid-1990s when a group of neighborhood children approached Raul Macias, a business owner who had emigrated from Mexico 20 years earlier, for money to help pay for their soccer dues and referee fees. Macias was disturbed by the lack of resources the children faced, and concerned about their poor performance in existing leagues. He began to coach them, and soon he was coaching multiple teams. By the late 1990s the Anahuak league was underway. Today, AYSA is incorporated as a nonprofit that serves over 2,000 children. Including the family members who regularly attend games and team meetings, the AYSA constituency numbers over 8,000.<sup>33</sup>

---

30. See JOE LINTON, *DOWN BY THE LOS ANGELES RIVER* (2005); JENNIFER PRICE, *FLIGHT MAPS: ADVENTURES WITH NATURE IN MODERN AMERICA* (1999); Jennifer Price, *Paradise Reclaimed: A Field Guide to the Los Angeles River*, L.A. WEEKLY, Aug. 10–16, 2001.

31. MacAdams, *supra* note 26.

32. See <http://anahuakyouthsoccer.org>; Hector Becerra, *L.A. Activist Has a Lot on the Ball Besides Soccer*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 17, 2008, available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/oct/17/local/me-soccerguy17> (last visited Sept. 27, 2010). See also Raul Lejano & Anne Taufen Wessells, *Community and Economic Development*, 43 URBAN STUDIES 1469–89 (2006); ROBERT GARCIA, *DREAMS OF FIELDS: SOCCER, COMMUNITY AND EQUAL JUSTICE* (2002), available at <http://www.cityprojectca.org/pdf/dreamsoffields.pdf>.

33. Urban Semillas, *Anahuak Youth Sports Association*, <http://www.urbansemillas.com/urbansemillas.com/Anahuak.html> (last visited Sept. 22, 2010).

AYSA became involved in Los Angeles-area watershed management because of their need for space. With growing numbers of players, teams, and weekend games, the league faced an immediate shortage of soccer fields where they could practice and compete. A fortunate coincidence between urban open space activists and advocates of urban stream restoration and nonstructural flood control is that both objectives can be served by highly compatible site uses. Park activists and stream restoration advocates both face the cruel reality of urban political economy—land that is desirable for centrally located, public recreation use, or for storm water management and groundwater recharge, is usually also land that is locked in an urban growth machine requiring maximal revenue generation. Turning an urban site into a park or a watershed retention basin is a hard sell to politicians and developers who would prefer to capture its development value in private real estate dollars. In Los Angeles, the emergent alliance between park people and stream restoration people has been crucial to the growth of the urban watershed management paradigm. At a central brownfield site along the Los Angeles River, Taylor Yard, the ability to build a coalition around the vision of a park enabled open space activists and stream restoration advocates to successfully overturn well-established plans for light industrial redevelopment.<sup>34</sup> AYSA played the crucial role in bringing about this accomplishment by incorporating a social equity and environmental justice claim that had tremendous political valence in the region and the state.

The AYSA soccer league draws players from northeast Los Angeles. The predominant demographic is low- to middle-income Latino children, ages 5 to 17. These children live in neighborhoods characterized by a relative lack of park space and recreational opportunities.<sup>35</sup> While the phrase environmental justice has traditionally signaled the crusade *against* disproportionate environmental hazards faced by low-income and minority groups,<sup>36</sup> it has increasingly also come to include the movement *for* greater equity in environmental resources such as beneficial landscapes and waterscapes. As the struggle for control over the future of development at Taylor Yard unfolded in 2002, both meanings of environmental justice were mobilized.<sup>37</sup>

The children of the neighborhoods surrounding Taylor Yard were enrolled in the land use controversy over the site, symbolizing the

---

34. Lejano & Wessells, *supra* note 32.

35. See Jennifer Wolch et al., *Parks and Park Funding in Los Angeles: An Equity Mapping Analysis*, 26 *URBAN GEOGRAPHY* 4–35 (2005).

36. *CONFRONTING ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM: VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS* (Robert D. Bullard ed., 1993); *THE QUEST FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE POLITICS OF POLLUTION* (Robert D. Bullard ed., 2005).

37. Lejano & Wessells, *supra* note 32.

human cost of environmental risks that would result from an approved industrial project. The industrial project was effectively derailed by a successful legal challenge to the developer's environmental approvals by arguing that a full Environmental Impact Review (EIR) was required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) to assess the air pollution risks to neighboring residents, especially children. This is an environmental justice claim in the traditional sense, and its human factor was visibly and powerfully represented at events and in the press by uniform-clad AYSA soccer players—children who not only should be spared the increased air pollution of additional industrial development along the river, but who also deserved parks and fields for their soccer games. The industrial project at Taylor Yard was abandoned, and California State Parks bought the parcel from the developer with bond monies approved for urban parks the year before.

The Taylor Yard crescent is a coveted stretch of the Los Angeles River for restoration-minded river activists. It is one of the only places in the river's 52-mile path through the city where concrete gives way to soft riverbed and natural riparian habitat. The bend in the river at Taylor Yard, which until the mid-1980s was occupied by a rail car switching area, provides an ideal area for an experiment in geo-technical engineering and nonstructural flood control. Beginning with feasibility studies in the early 1990s, river activists have envisioned a riparian open space zone bioengineered at the site to perform storm water retention and groundwater recharge during major flood events, effectively slowing, cleaning, and capturing some of the torrential floodwaters that surge through the channelized river.

Thanks in large part to the continued visibility and persistence of the AYSA soccer players, plans for the Rio de Los Angeles State Park at Taylor Yard were approved in 2004. Construction began in January 2005, and the park was dedicated on Earth Day in 2007. Its site design includes natural river wetlands and passive recreation areas providing watershed management functions, as well as playing fields and active recreation equipment.

AYSA children and their families have continued to participate actively in watershed initiatives, and their presence—usually in uniform—can elicit exasperation from professionals involved in watershed planning and management. At a community outreach event for the Los Angeles River Master Plan, held at the Goodwill Work Source Center in East Los Angeles in October 2005, maps of the river corridor were enlarged and posted on tables and walls. As swarms of AYSA children wrote “soccer fields” on Post-it notes and affixed them to the maps, a project consultant noted dismissively, “some people come in here with a

little bit of an agenda.”<sup>38</sup> From a participatory, collaborative watershed management perspective, this is far from a bad thing. From an equity perspective, when citizens who have been marginalized within the grass-roots environmental community start to turn up consistently at watershed meetings, it might be a good thing.

Soccer fields will not solve the Los Angeles basin’s water management dilemmas. However, since its participation in the park victory at Taylor Yard, AYSA has expanded its mission and outreach to include environmental education. Miguel Luna, a former staff member at Heal the Bay,<sup>39</sup> is now the Environmental Director at AYSA. The children and their families are passionate about soccer, and having places to play. In at least one case, their passion has led to a more equitable and environmentally desirable outcome in watershed management than the existing urban development and environmentalist regimes would have been able to deliver without them.

### III. DISCUSSION

Both of the examples above involve stakeholders in the Los Angeles basin who move from being marginalized in or absent from water resource decision-making, to being nodes of collective political capacity within the urban watershed management process. At first glance, it might seem that highly educated, adult poet-artists and under-resourced, youth soccer players have fundamentally different experiences in their transformation to effective environmental activists. However, in this analysis I would like to suggest an important theoretical linkage on the dimension of experiential place attachment.

Sense of place is a construct well utilized by environmental writers advocating for a restored notion of bioregionalism.<sup>40</sup> To know a place is to have a particular understanding of how a geographic region functions, physically, ecologically, and socially. Flores adopts the equation of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan: “space plus culture equals place.”<sup>41</sup>

Adding to this geographical-historic definition of place, the case examples above emphasize not just knowing space plus culture, but also knowing one’s situation within both, and through a collective identifica-

38. Field notes from the L.A. River Revitalization Plan Public Outreach Meeting (Oct. 22, 2005) (on file with the author).

39. See <http://www.healthebay.org>.

40. See James Parsons, *On “Bioregionalism” and “Watershed Consciousness”* 37 *PROF. GEOG.* 1–6 (1985); Dan Flores, *Place: An Argument for Bioregional History*, 18 *ENVT. HIST. REV.* 1–18 (1994); *BIOREGIONALISM* (Michael Vincent McGinnis ed., 1999).

41. Flores, *supra* note 40, at 6; YI-FU TUAN, *SPACE AND PLACE: THE PERSPECTIVE OF EXPERIENCE* (1977).

tion, the capacity to transcend the immediate constraints of both. As Betsy Taylor has recently argued, “democratic common ground . . . [arises] through the collective stewardship of place.”<sup>42</sup> The activism of FoLAR and AYSA grow out of their member-citizens becoming identified with particular realities and possibilities at specific places within the watershed. Their watershed activism is a manifestation of being “placed.”<sup>43</sup> To be or become “placed” is greater than the sum of being in a space plus being in a culture. Being “placed” entails collective, endeavor-oriented, spiritual and political dimensions. Being “placed” is key to greater equity.

For a highly mobile urban population with profound disparities in economic and educational opportunities, becoming “placed” social-ecological political citizens is no small feat. Environmental historians have emphasized the role of physical labor in coming to know a place, and especially a water resource.<sup>44</sup> However, in our current era of knowledge and service sector economies, the potential to become re-“placed” in the bioregion through physical labor is limited; increasingly, place-attachment must take place through leisure and recreational activities. This helps to account for the characteristics of many self-reporting watershed activists: highly educated, less mobile than average, motivated by classic ecocentric values.<sup>45</sup> This incarnation of the watershed movement is not adequately widespread to provide the fabric of a groundswell American political movement.

The groups discussed above, however, present a different ethos and approach. The Los Angeles citizens who become active in watershed management through FoLAR and through AYSA do so largely through their physical, enacted relationships to place. Recreation becomes less a utilitarian use value of environmental resources, and more a mode of civic, ecological, and artistic engagement. When residents walk, bike, hike, run, and even play soccer alongside the river, they develop a place identity as watershed citizens, willing to lay claim to spaces where they feel a legitimate social-ecological investment and connection. In both examples above, this has led to significant transformations in the process and outcomes of watershed management. FoLAR and AYSA members are “placed” political actors within the watershed. The fact that they are not traditional environmentalists is beside the point in building effective

---

42. Betsy Taylor, “Place” as Prepolitical Grounds of Democracy: An Appalachian Case Study in Class Conflict, Forest Politics, and Civic Networks, 52 *AM. BEHAVIORAL SCI.* 826–45 (2009).

43. Michael V. McGinnis, *Bioregional Organization: A Constitution of Home Place*, 52 *HUM. ECO. REV.* 72–84 (1995).

44. See, e.g., DONALD WORSTER, *RIVERS OF EMPIRE: WATER, ARIDITY, AND THE GROWTH OF THE AMERICAN WEST* (1985); WHITE, *supra* note 15.

45. Woolley et al., *supra* note 6.

local river activism. When it comes to equity concerns in urban watershed management, the fact that they are not traditional environmentalists *is* the point. Marginalized citizens are bringing their voices to the table, and making their voices heard, in watershed planning.

FoLAR also emphasizes physical, exploratory activities such as river walks, bike tours, and clean-up days. People come to know the place of the river and the watershed by actually going out into it. FoLAR does not emphasize the anti-urban ethos of environmental restoration. Rather, it embraces the creative potentials of the city and invites people to find their way into their own authentic relationship with the watercourse at the city's center. Despite its growth and effectiveness as a watershed policy organization, the basis of FoLAR's activity is in cultural creativity, and its most politically effective efforts in collaborative watershed management have grown out of the ability to merge the universality of experience (people drawn to the water in their midst) with creative possibility (What might this watercourse look like and/or act like, if it was treated differently?). In this sense FoLAR is *still* an arts organization.

Similarly, AYSA will always be a soccer organization. However, children and their parents were so inspired and motivated by their experience playing soccer with each other in their neighborhoods that they became dogged about engaging the political process—the watershed management process, in this case, where parks are the new urban flood management solution in Los Angeles. In the process of gaining park spaces, they are also becoming watershed stewards. In the meetings leading up to the presentation and approval of plans for the park at Taylor Yard, it was the AYSA constituency that continually turned out and weighed in, and AYSA programming is expanding to include ecological education and community development.

In both groups, physical, lived, experiential relationship to the watershed and its spaces grows a political constituency among Los Angeles citizens historically under-represented in water management.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Paradoxically, notions of equity that defy utilitarian logic—those that focus on the place-based, intrinsic, and identity values which people associate with their watershed—may be the route through which procedural utilitarian and ultimately consequentialist utilitarian measures of equity are most readily accomplished. Improvements in means and ends-based assessments of equity in water resource management—who gets included in decision-making processes, and who gets what when decisions are made; or what Wilder calls “political equity” and “eco-

conomic equity,” respectively<sup>46</sup>—may be most successfully achieved through collectively held, viscerally felt connections to the water resource itself.

The intrinsic value that water holds for a group of people can galvanize them into and sustain them through political action. This enables politically and/or economically marginalized groups to organize themselves to gain a seat at the table in water resource management processes (satisfying tenets of procedural equity), and to marshal political, economic, and cultural resources in order to affect the material outcomes of decentralized decision-making processes (satisfying tenets of consequentialist, utilitarian equity).

Thus, while *utilitarian* concepts of water equity and *symbolic, intrinsic* concepts of water equity may be incommensurable for immediate comparison, they are not unrelated: *Intrinsic, place-based water values give rise to collective political power, which in turn seeks out and develops utilitarian resources to achieve its ends.*

In the case examples above, despite the development of new, place-based capacities for participation in water resource governance, rational utilitarianism remains a nearly immutable organizing influence with its own powerful internal logic. Utilitarianism is not going anywhere. Nor, I suspect, would we really want it to. We all depend upon it too deeply to sort our activities into divisible, exchangeable, measurable units: budgets, water transfers, statistically significant research, capital investments, biodiversity measures, user fees, and so on. So the question becomes: How can disadvantaged groups contend more successfully within a utilitarian framework?

One answer is that they build their collective intentions and capacities around symbolic, intrinsic, lifestyle, identity-laden values. As the data above suggests, the potential of such collective, intrinsic water values is as a veritable wellspring—a possibly endless source—of political power.

Such a claim might seem hopelessly naïve in light of research showing water access and rights being stripped from indigenous peoples, poor farmers, and other economically marginalized groups with longstanding, deep-seated, complex relationships with their water resources.<sup>47</sup> Why would newly cultivated symbolic, intrinsic, and lifestyle-oriented water values lead to political power for marginalized groups, when well-established, subsistence-oriented water values have often proved so powerless historically?

---

46. Wilder, *supra* note 10.

47. See, e.g., BROWN & INGRAM, *supra* note 14.

The answer lies partially in the decentralization that has overtaken water resource governance over the last two decades. By design, if not always in practice, there are more entry points for legitimate participation in water policy development and administration than at any time in the recent modern past. A second part of the answer, however, is grounded in hard-boiled reality: Cultivation of symbolic, intrinsic, collectively held water values will *not* always lead to greater political power and improved equity for marginalized groups in urban watershed management. But given the policy reforms of recent years, reinforced by the case examples discussed here, it *might*, and it *can*, and that is an important place to start.

