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Water, politics and power

By Andrew Roth
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Water has formed the landscape of the American west in profound ways, as any visitor to the Grand Canyon knows. In equally powerful, but less obvious ways, water has also shaped the region's balance of power and politics.

To understand the American West, we need to understand water, because human efforts to control it have played a central role in the West's development. Water has been both a source of wealth and an important, if often overlooked, basis of political power. In an arid environment (as much of the American West is), control of water has made possible significant concentrations of wealth and power, with sweeping consequences for democracy.

In "Rivers of Empire" (1985), historian Donald Worster argued that the American West is an empire, whose wealth and power ultimately derive from control of water. In this mode, we treat water as a commodity, which a narrow elite controls to its advantage. Worster questions whether these arrangements are compatible with democratic ideals.

Americans have not always treated water as a private commodity to be manipulated for profit. From the 1840s-1890s, efforts at water control in the American west were primarily small in scale, under local and direct control of the communities who used the water. These local irrigators' goal was subsistence.

In 1902, Congress created the Reclamation Service, charging it with providing water to aid in development of the west's arid lands. (The Reclamation Service became the Bureau of Reclamation in 1923.) Local communities grudgingly ceded administrative control to the Bureau in return for its capital and expertise, opening the way for larger irrigation projects. As the Bureau of Reclamation fought to establish its authority, the American west underwent crucial social changes, including particularly the development of large-scale, corporate agriculture.

By the 1940s, the Bureau of Reclamation had secured an increasingly large budget from Congress, and it had undertaken mammoth irrigation projects such as Hoover Dam and Grand Coulee Dam. The Bureau operated as one member of what Worster calls the iron triangle, an uneasy but resilient alliance among bureaucratic planners, corporate agriculture, and elected politicians. In this analysis, members of the iron triangle control the distribution of water and its products, to benefit themselves while excluding ordinary citizens.

Across the three historic phases of the American West, we can identify three distinct shifts: First, the scale of water control continually increases; second, authority transfers from local communities to remote elites, and, third, the goals of water control shift from subsistence to profits. Each phase reflects a step of ecological intensification, Worster's term for the process of extracting more economic yield from rivers and watersheds.

This intensification presents two intertwining problems, one ecological and one political. Environmentally, the process of ecological intensification has real, material limits - water is a finite natural resource. Politically, the resulting concentration of wealth and power among a narrow elite is counter-democratic.

The consequences are severe: If the contemporary American West has become an empire, history shows that the next phase is inevitably collapse. Our society's existing orientation to water, as a commodity, epitomizes a relation to nature that is neither desirable nor sustainable.

The historical perspective that leads Worster to this conclusion also provides the model for a viable alternative. How we survive will depend on whether we can change our values, from "nature domination to nature accommodation." Worster envisions a decentralized, localized American West, modeled on John Wesley Powell's 1879 proposal for settlement organized on the basis of natural watersheds.

Understanding the choices our predecessors made, we see how maximizing wealth and empire diminishes freedom and democracy. Reviving Powell's vision of social organization based on watersheds may well allow us to transform our empire into something better - not only for ourselves but for all creatures in the biotic community.

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