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Dyckman, Caitlin

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Peer reviewed

Water, Culture, & Power: Local Struggles in a Global Context

Edited by John M. Donahue and Barbara Rose Johnston

(Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1998)

Reviewed by Caitlin Dyckman

This book captures the constraints and inevitable trade-offs associated with the intricate combination of politics, economic development, local identity and huge investment in water resources. In a series of essays, the conflicts, players, historical context and effects of water projects on communities throughout the world are described. The case studies are comprehensive, but slightly U.S.-centric. They include cases from South Texas, the Pacific Northwest, the Colorado River, Central Arizona and Tennessee, as well as major projects in Zimbabwe, Mexico, Honduras, and the Middle East.

The editors group the essays according to three subheadings: "Rights and Resources," "Project Culture and Hydropolitics," and "The Culture and Power Dimensions of Water Scarcity." They adeptly use the introductory and concluding chapters to unify the authors' varied voices. Each author's contribution focuses on hotspots of conflict, generally areas in which the local communities' perspectives were overlooked or disregarded. The editors follow each essay with a teaching section entitled "Food for Thought," and use it to raise universal themes and ideas to consider. However, they struggle at times to create a uniform voice with the book. The great disparity in tone and impression of the authors seemed to depend on their time and emotional investment in the communities they reviewed. This left the book with a sense of discontinuity, especially with the different time scales and academic perspectives of the authors (historical v. on-the-ground social research).

Despite an evident intent to objectively portray the water conflict in select essays, most of the authors use language that exposes their frustration or emotion about the projects. Some are blatantly subjective. In particular, William Loker, depicts a frightful result in the aftermath of Honduras' El Cajon dam. Having worked as long as he did in the community, watching the realization of the predicted problems associated with a financially dead-weight project that everyone was aware would push the poorest farmers into further poverty, his tone is

angry and overtly condemning. In a sense, this subjectivity reflects the struggle over water itself; no one can remain even partially objective in the process of providing or competing for the most basic human resource. Assuming that most of the authors were asked for objective accounts, their subjective tones were an elegant, simple illustration of the power that water evokes even in the most unbiased observer.

As a whole, the essays also expose an eerily consistent pattern of marginalization in conjunction with water projects. In spite of efforts to account for and ameliorate the problem of local sacrifice for the greatest good, the cases illustrate the problem of defining the greatest good. The essays show that 'good' and interests are defined by cultural and natural, as well as traditional monetary values. To subsistence communities, loss of land to dams, the contamination of a river or the change in its flow correspond to a loss of cultural identity and traditions, particularly in the Pacific Northwest. In theory, planners work toward what they believe is the 'greatest good' as it has been voiced through a participatory process and assimilated into a unified objective. However, with multiple voices and competing interests, some voices are inevitably excluded, fall silent, or simply cannot be heard. For example, Claudia Rogers' essay on the recent Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway describes an inclusionary planning process spanning several states. It was created with an awareness of the needs of affected local communities. Yet, the essay exposes the fact that the project is a financial and social debacle, despite planners' best efforts.

The collection of interviews and research reveal the negative effects of large scale water projects on those who have to live with the changes they bring to individual communities. Some of these changes are anticipated, while others come as complete surprises. The fundamental question is: How can this occur, in spite of enlightened socially conscientious planners guiding the process? The essays expose the often-neglected yet extremely powerful role of momentum surrounding such projects. In the face of financial and social indications that the projects should stop, the monetary and emotional investments often propel construction forward. The editors and some authors also attempt to examine the definition of a human right, and how that should be approached, particularly in countries where human rights as the western world defines them are already violated; a water project is another in the long line of violations that further constrains land availability.

This book is an excellent starting point for anyone interested in the trade-offs that appear inherent in resource allocation, especially the marginalization of values that conflict with monetary and political drivers. Unfortunately, most of the essays postulate that despite the best-laid plans of mice and men, people suffer from reallocation, perpetuating the concept of finite resources. But they introduce the importance of at least considering alternate valuation methods, whether through human rights, cultural norms or an indigenous perspective. Although comprehensive on most of the issues, several essays are topical (albeit the nature of an essay), and it would behoove the reader to follow through with the references to gain a better sense of some of the conflicts. I appreciated the essays as individual pieces, preferring to create my own assessment rather than absorb the 'Food for Thought.'