

Book: Water is for Fighting Over and Other Myths about Water In the West, by John Fleck

Report by: Shayna Jones – 3/1/18

1. What did you get out of the book?

Fleck provides compelling examples to disprove some of the central “myths” of water in the West. These include ideas such as: 1) Water is for fighting over and is a source of conflict; 2) Water flows uphill to money; 3) Water shortage typically leads to more limited economic growth; 4) The system of prior appropriation stands in the way of creating solutions and 5) In the West, we are in a state of crisis due to water supply.

Overall, Fleck provides compelling examples from the Colorado River Basin from Albuquerque, Las Vegas, the Imperial Valley in California, Arizona and many other locations, that illustrate that communities that depend on the Colorado River are learning to thrive, not just survive, on less water. Management of the “saved” water remains a central issue that requires collective action to work through. Currently, water savings from these communities are not translating into less stress on the over-allocated Colorado River water system, and a change in the rules governing water savings and shortages are critically needed. Arguing over the imperfections of water law is not an effective path forward. What is needed is collective action and agreement. The book suggests that negotiated solutions that broadly share water shortages, water banking and trading among water users, and shortage sharing agreements are needed. There are examples of these types of negotiated solutions in the West provided in the book. Examples in the book that illustrated negotiated solutions include agreements in California with the agricultural community and municipalities, and the famous Colorado River Delta pulse flow (Minute 319) agreement among a broad coalition of groups. More dialogue is needed at a regional level, and the biggest barrier to it is believing in the myths of water in the West. The keys to success for regional dialogue and actions seems to be focused on building social capital, which often starts small with informal, non-binding discussions that over time lead to the creation of regional organizations that are set up to deal with critical regional water issues.

2. Would you recommend it to class members?

Although perhaps not as easy of a read, or as enticing as the book on John Wesley Powell and some of the others covered by our cohort, this book is a must read for anyone who wants to “understand how to form a broad institution umbrella organization to accomplish collective water management goals that no community could undertake on its own” (Pg 102). It has multiple examples from different regions of the Colorado River Watershed of groups coming together to solve large-scale water issues, with great guiding principles and tangible stories covering the “how” of the key element to success – developing “social capital”, which the book defines as the “interpersonal connections, shared understanding and collaborative institutions”, that opens the door to more creative and flexible problem solving.

3. What 3-5 key points would you like to discuss with the class?

- This book suggests that what is needed in the Colorado River Watershed, and likely across the West, are more clearly set rules for what happens when shortages occur, and changes in rules to make everyone share in shortages. The author states that this will in turn provide incentives for water conservation to translate into less stress on our river systems. For examples, the book notes that the Law of the Colorado River dictates that California gets all its water first, leaving Arizona, Nevada, the Upper Basin states, Native American reservations, and the environment at risk at times of shortages. But many water leaders note that in the event of water shortages, it seems like a stretch to believe that we really honor the law and let whole communities, cities and states dry up. Would it not be more realistic that we would end up devising a way to share the shortage across the board? How does the Water Literate Leaders view this proposed path forward for our region?
- This book provides some great insight into the “Tragedy of the Commons” and how collective action issues should not be considered hopeless. The books discusses Nobel-prize winner Elinor Ostrom’s studies of water basin management in California and other locations, and the critical process of how the communities and organizations came together to implement collective management of the issue. Typical characteristics founds in successful governance efforts include:
 - Informal, non-binding communication between groups in the beginning, termed “cheap talk” plays a critical role in success. This is seen as “starting small” approach and often leads ultimately to developing formal governmental and legal institutions.
 - Governance systems that define the boundaries of the area where the resource will be managed; Determine who gets to use the resource, when and how much; Establish who pays to maintain health of the resource so that its use can continue into the future; Establish who pays for monitoring the resource and how it is used, enforces restrictions and resolves conflicts; Determine how problems across larger scales will be resolved; and Create a framework for evolution of rules over time as understanding and demands change.

Given the list of characteristics and blueprint for systems typically found in successful efforts, which of these do you think we have in place here in Northern Colorado already? What are some gaps that we need to work on in order to be on a path for successful, regional collective action on water issues?