



PUBLIC AFFAIRS

When Good People Do Bad Things

Confronting Western Water Culture

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For nearly four years, I've been doing fieldwork in a society that I have no hesitancy in labeling as culturally dysfunctional, in the same league as Colin Turnbull's Mountain People, the Ik. Turnbull upset the discipline by claiming that cultures don't always function smoothly or sustainably. He reported that the Ik evicted their own children at an early age, letting them fend for their own food rather than compete with the parents. Retrospective analysis has concluded that it wasn't really the Ik culture that was to blame, but the stress of famine that led an otherwise functional culture to engage in dysfunctional behavior.

The culture I have been trying to make sense of, and where the Ik provide a helpful reference, is what I call "Western water culture." This culture is situated in the 18 Western US states where, in the words of Mark Twain, "Whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting." My study village was Santa Fe, NM, where I was the director of the local watershed association (www.santafewatershed.org). The cultural dysfunction in Santa Fe doesn't take the form of parents evicting their children, but the entire community evicting the river that once flowed through town. Like Ik parents, Santa Feans are afraid that they won't have enough water for themselves if they allow the river to have any. To safeguard their supply, they have built reservoirs upstream from the city that are big enough to

capture the entire flow of the river, except in the spring when the mountain snowpack melts and some of the water escapes into the river.

Exactly 400 years ago, in 1609, the Spanish chose this spot to establish their northern capital because of its secure water. Like the Pueblo Indians, the Spanish diverted river water into irrigation canals (*acequias*). At the time of the American Conquest in 1848, there were about 30 *acequias* conveying Santa Fe River

water to 2,000 acres of agricultural fields. The community was food self-sufficient, but not for long. The Americans introduced two important cultural concepts: (1) water could be privatized and (2) dams could be built to hold the privatized water and release it later for sale. A series of progressively larger dams ensued, using water acquired through unscrupulous legal maneuvers.

Today it is the municipality itself that owns the river's water, having purchased it from the private water utility. A river owned by the people sounds like a good thing, but that's where cultural values come in. In the minds of Santa Feans, the river competes with people for water. Civic responsibility calls for keeping the water in the reservoirs and out of the river.

On what basis can we declare the dry Santa Fe River to be a cultural choice rather than a physical necessity? The emic view, of course, is that there is no choice; Santa Feans are behaving

the way they must. The etic view, informed by science, is just as straightforward. Environmental flows are fundamental to functioning ecosystems and the water cycle. Dewatering a river is a punishable offense in other dry countries facing similar challenges (eg, Australia, South Africa). Even US federal water agencies (eg, Army Corps of Engineers, Fish and Wildlife Service, USGS) prescribe environmental flows. But at the state and local levels, Western water culture trumps science. The water behavior of Santa Feans is fully supported by New Mexico state law.

What's an anthropologist to do? It's not enough, in my view, to observe all behavior through the academic indulgence of cultural relativism. With the climate heating up, we need to go after the root causes of our society's unsustainable use of natural resources, and expose and challenge dysfunctional values using the tools our discipline has to offer. As anthropologists, we have access to incredible knowledge resources about what makes societies sustainable and how to live within nature's

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parameters. The sustainable practices of indigenous peoples, for example, have less to do with technology (though that's certainly important) than with worldviews, ethics and spirituality: in a word, "culture." Western water culture, and the culture of the West in general, need help, and we anthropologists need work. It could be a beautiful relationship!

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