

CADILLAC DESERT

Since the proposed raising of Shasta dam, its impacts on the McCloud river and Native American sacred sites, and the rebirth of the Peripheral Canal around the Delta are much in the news, maybe it's time to read (or re-read) Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert: the American West and Its Disappearing Water* (582 pp., Penguin Books, 1986.)

Reisner says that the West, being mostly desert or semi-desert, could naturally sustain only small populations. But once it had been sold as an empty paradise by hucksters, land speculators, bankers and railroad magnates, and began to fill up with Eastern immigrants, something unnatural had to be done to keep them there and guarantee others following. Those unnatural somethings – preeminently the building of canals and dams and the pumping of groundwater almost to extinction – are the book's focus.

When the Spaniards first saw San Francisco, no trees grew there – it was too dry and windy. Up to the 1850's the Central Valley was still the Serengetti of America – home to untold millions of waterfowl, great herds of elk, thousands of grizzly bears. By the mid-1980's most of the wildlife was gone, and California had become the seventh largest world economy, provider of a third of the U.S.'s food, home to two of the world's largest and richest communities, L.A. and the Bay Area. And all thanks to water often stored, then moved, in some cases, for hundreds of miles.

This has mostly been the work of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. From the 1930's to the 1980's one or the other agency dammed

almost every major river in the West, some with spectacular results.

Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia, for instance, forever blocked the United States' biggest salmon run, and by providing massive electricity to run aluminum plants, helped assure an Allied victory in World War II. Hoover Dam sent Colorado River water to L.A., thus helping it become the megalopolis we know today. By 1986 the feds had built 50,000 major dams, on progressively poorer sites, including 2,000 really big ones, like Shasta, justified as providing irrigation, flood control, power generation, water for cities and recreation.

By then the Bureau and the Corps had become addicted to dam building, farmers to receiving huge subsidies in the form of dirt cheap water, politicians to bringing pork to their home states, the national government turning a blind eye, and citizens paying for it all. It was clear, too, that the Bureau, created to help small farmers, instead helped rich ones get richer – “farmers” of vast acreages like Standard Oil, newspaper magnates and foreign conglomerates.

And costs go well beyond the billions paid by taxpayers or the destruction of wild rivers: dams can fail (Reisner gives a couple of spectacular examples) with massive property damage and loss of life. They will become waterfalls – government estimates of dam life range from 50 to 100 years before siltation seriously limits storage capacity. And salt buildup, already advanced, can ruin soils for centuries.

Also, schemes to double the Southwest's water by bringing it down from northwest California, Oregon,

Washington, British Columbia and Alaska may be re-vivified at any moment.

So, one of the reasons for reading *Cadillac Desert* is to learn what to ask about water projects. Are the promoters revealing the true costs as well as the benefits? Have they seriously considered conservation alternatives? Is the project financially sensible? Is there a need for the water, and do the supposed benefactors even want it? Finally, do we really want to exchange further destruction of wild rivers for more automobiles and tract houses?

Caveat emptor: “water flows toward power and money.”