

Legacy of ‘Cadillac Desert’ highlights severity of West’s water crisis

Erik Skindrud, The Sacramento Bee, 8-8-16

Around 1925, Los Angeles water baron William Mulholland badgered Yosemite National Park Superintendent Horace M. Albright with a proposal to dam Yosemite Valley. While the project would obliterate a natural marvel, Mulholland offered to mitigate the loss with a yearlong photo documentary project.

And then, as Albright related the story to Marc Reisner, Mulholland saw the dam and its waters rising, staunching “the goddamn waste” represented by a free-flowing Merced River.

Reisner collected this anecdote while researching “Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water” – which marks its 30th anniversary this summer. The book has since put its stamp on the careers and imaginations of many who care about the American West. Its durability is also a tribute to Reisner, who succumbed to colon cancer in 2000 at the age of 51.

Published when climate change was more theory than fact, the book scrutinized the water-fueled urbanization of the American West – an enterprise Reisner saw as unsustainable and headed for crisis. Three decades later, with droughts and wildfires raging, experts remain impressed by how much he got right.

“Reisner was ahead of his time on the science and the need for changed policy,” said John Sabo, director of Arizona State University’s Future H2O research initiative. “What current data confirms with maps and numbers, Reisner found with his dogged instincts.”

Most of Reisner’s conclusions stand tall under subsequent science. They include the West’s perilous rates of groundwater depletion, the inability of regional supplies to sustain populations, the devastating effect on fish and wildlife of dams and diversions – and the choking effect of irrigation-borne salt on agriculture. Reisner also raised one issue that looks less threatening today – the rate at which reservoirs silt up.

The severity of the West’s water crisis is underlined by recent results published by Jay Famiglietti of the University of California, Irvine, and NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Combining groundwater and climate trends, his team predicts that California’s San Joaquin Valley will find its fabulously productive farmland – and the state’s \$43 billion agriculture industry – severely diminished over the next century. The only remedy, Famiglietti suggests, may be to pipe in water from Oregon or elsewhere.

In addition to its gun-sight accuracy, “Cadillac Desert” displays wit, sparkling prose and compelling anecdotes that illuminate figures like Mulholland. Taken together, they make the book a classic that remains a pleasure to read.

A pair of sentences on the Los Angeles aqueduct gives a hint of the author’s verve and confident diction.

“The aqueduct would traverse some of the most scissile, fractionated, fault-splintered topography in North America,” Reisner writes. “It would cover 223 miles, 53 of them in tunnels; where tunneling was too risky, there would be siphons whose acclivities and declivities exceeded fiftygrade.”

His call to action spurred a generation to careers in environmental science. It also inspired journalists, outdoor enthusiasts and citizens. For many Californians like myself, glimpses of the Colorado, Los Angeles, Merced and other watercourses were never the same after reading “Cadillac Desert.” The same goes for dams – from the Mulholland of Lake Hollywood to the O’Shaughnessy of Hetch Hetchy in Yosemite and beyond.

While working in Mariposa County and Yosemite National Park for seven years, my thoughts kept going back to Reisner’s anecdote about damming the Merced River in Yosemite Valley. Knowing how plans to remove a few trees or campsites in the park can ignite controversy, I figured there had to be more information about Mulholland’s stunning suggestion.

Mulholland biographer Les Standiford, as well as archivists at Texas Tech University, where Reisner’s papers are housed, and at the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, could point to no documents referencing the proposal.

The story “sounds exactly like what (Mulholland) would say,” said Reisner’s widow, Lawrie Mott of San Anselmo, although she could point to no other source. Mulholland’s great-granddaughter, former San Luis Obispo city councilmember Christine Mulholland, was also familiar with the tale. Her aunt, the late author Catherine Mulholland, repeated it in her biography of her famous grandfather.

“She thought (the story) was a scream,” Christine Mulholland said. “(My great-grandfather) probably did say it. He was very blunt-spoken – an Irishman who never lost his brogue. And of course, (San Francisco engineer Michael) O’Shaughnessy was damming Hetch Hetchy at the time. But whether it was a realistic proposal, I don’t know.”

President Woodrow Wilson signed the Raker Act, authorizing the damming of Yosemite National Park’s Hetch Hetchy Valley, in 1913. A year later, park champion John Muir was dead – an end widely credited to the decision. The Hetchy Hetchy Dam project was completed in 1923 – not long before the reputed encounter between Mulholland and Albright.

The former Yosemite superintendent would have been in his 80s – recalling an encounter from 60 years earlier – when Reisner interviewed him in the 1980s.

While the proposal to dam the Merced River in Yosemite Valley was never formalized, plans are afoot for a new dam in the Sierra. Last month, the San Joaquin Valley Water Infrastructure Authority signed a document with the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Reclamation to allow feasibility studies for a reservoir at Temperance Flat on the upper San Joaquin River, east of Fresno.

While Temperance Flat is no Hetch Hetchy, the proposal is hotly contested. It pits Valley ranchers against river advocates, Native Americans and others – in a faceoff reminiscent of earlier water battles and Mulholland’s threat.

In many ways, not much has changed across California’s landscape over a century.

And while he was certainly a prophet crying out from the desert, time has also proved Reisner a wise counselor. The federal government’s 2012 Colorado River Basin Water Supply and Demand Study charts the region’s yawning gap in terms of future supply and identifies a list of options to address it. These include Mulhollandian schemes like an offshore pipeline to ferry Columbia River water to Southern California, pipelines to import Missouri or Mississippi water, or the use of supertankers to haul water from Alaska.

In the end, though, the study centers its attention on the hard-nosed, down-to-earth options Reisner favored: increased efficiency, conservation, recycling and a new worldview that acknowledges the region's aridity. According to Sabo, who credits "Cadillac Desert" with helping to chart his own career, cost will prove to be the chief consideration. While desalination is one of the pricier options today, new membrane technologies promise to make "desal" deliverable. Building dams and reservoirs is inefficient in terms of long-term return on investment, he said.

"When we really dig in, we realize that there just aren't that many supplies left except wastewater and the ocean," Sabo explained.

In his love for the region, its land, water, plants, wildlife and people, Reisner and his book give us an informed legacy that should be valued by dwellers of California and the West.