

5-1998

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Recommended Citation

Gottlieb, Robert, "A Sense of Place" (1998). *UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship*.
http://scholar.oxy.edu/uep_faculty/726

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Science

A Sense of Place

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Water, Culture, and Power. Local Struggles in a Global Context. JOHN M. DONAHUE and BARBARA ROSE JOHNSTON, Eds. Island Press, Washington, DC, 1998. xiv, 396 pp., illus. \$50. ISBN 1-55963-521-5. Paper, \$30. ISBN 1-55963-522-3.

In 1979, during the course of researching issues about the proposed Orme Dam northeast of Phoenix, Arizona, I encountered a remarkable opponent of the project named Carolina Butler. Ms. Butler, whose family had migrated from Mexico, had grown up working the cotton fields in Pinal County, the agricultural and semi-rural area situated between the exploding urban centers of Phoenix and Tucson. She had subsequently moved to the edge of the rapidly expanding suburb of Scottsdale, where her home was not far from the proposed dam site. Enlisted to their cause by members of the Yavapai Indian tribe, whose lands would be flooded by the dam, Butler became a forceful and effective critic of the project. Her effectiveness was due to her ability to challenge the technical and financial assumptions of the project while working closely with the varied opposition to the dam. These opponents included Yavapai tribal members concerned that the loss of land would lead to a loss of tribal identity, Audubon Society members concerned about endangered bald eagles, and local environmentalists concerned that the Orme Dam would reinforce the relentless urban expansion within the region.

Butler's capacity to draw together what could be considered a multi-cultural perspective on water projects mirrors the focus of *Water, Culture, and Power*, which considers the crucial cultural dimensions of water resources and management. The book, edited by John Donahue (chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Trinity University, San Antonio) and Barbara Rose Johnson (an anthropologist and senior research fellow at the Center for Political Ecology, Santa Cruz), provides an interdisciplinary collection of essays on water project conflicts, well characterized by the book's subtitle, "Local Struggles in a Global Context." These local struggles include the Central Arizona Project (which had also involved the Orme Dam proposal) and similar large-scale North American water diversion or hydroelectric projects in Quebec, Texas, the Southeastern United States, and the Pacific Northwest. They also include water projects from Zimbabwe, where the legacy of colonialism continues to influence water policy; Bangladesh, where women are particularly vulnerable to the disasters created by flooding; the Middle East, where water issues are intertwined with the politics of power and culture; and Honduras, where the scale of a dam project has foreclosed more effective options.

A common theme of the book is that indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable to the logic of water development. Water projects, with their institutional bureaucracies and techno-bureaucratic language, are generally based on economic and political considerations from outside the area where the water is to be developed. Indigenous peoples, operating with different sets of cultural values, are seen as needing to maintain control of their localities if they are to resist threats to the integrity and continuity of their ways of life. The loss of water robs these communities of their historical identities, of the way people view their past, and, ultimately, of the personal and communal satisfaction of living off the land.

These clashes of values also reflect different prescriptive modes: water as commons, or kinship use; water as state property, or tributary use; and water as private property, or market use. More broadly, a community value of water can be contrasted with the increasingly dominant commodity value of water, whether state- or privately-owned.

Water, Culture, and Power is a valuable contribution to the growing literature on resource policy and development that challenges the commodity value perspective in assessing the costs and impacts of specific projects. Although the 15 essays in this anthology cover a wide range of topics, places, and disciplinary perspectives, there is also an overall coherence to the analyses. This is provided primarily through the concluding "Food for Thought" sections of each chapter, which seek to weave in the common themes of place-based cultural or

community values as factors that also need to be recognized and “valued.” The book’s primary shortcoming, shared with other cultural and anthropological works on resource and development topics, is the disjunction between the analysis of the loss of value and a more dynamic view of the rapidly changing circumstances surrounding large-scale water development projects. The need to recognize the importance of place, or the need for an “ethic of place” in water policy, ultimately requires a different “ethic of use.” Such a reorientation of water policy is possible in a new era where the big water development projects are becoming increasingly problematic. The challenge, for both the community and commodity views of water, is to establish a framework where this ethic of use can prevail.

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