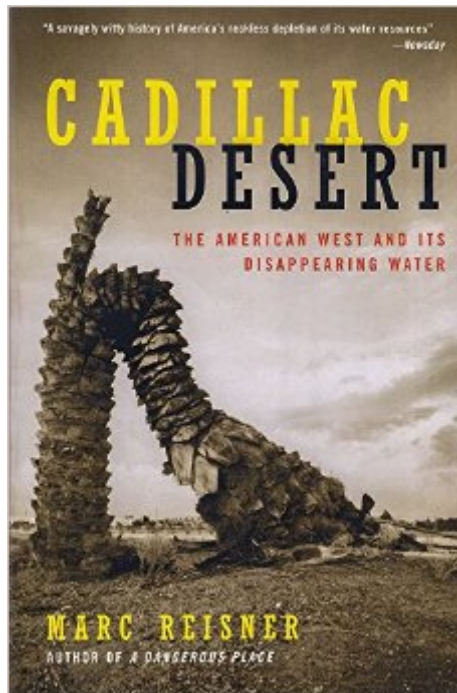


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Cadillac Desert: The American West And Its Disappearing Water, Revised Edition



Synopsis

"Beautifully written and meticulously researched."—St. Louis Post-Dispatch. This updated study of the economics, politics, and ecology of water covers more than a century of public and private desert reclamation in the American West.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I enthusiastically told friends that I was reading a book about "water development in the West" and they blankly would stare back and ask "Why"? Well, I discovered that the story of moving people and water into the West where humans really have no natural right living is quite entertaining. Reisner is the perfect storyteller and he permeates this real drama of pure will, deceit, graft, engineering prowess and the pork barrel with a subtle sarcastic wit I could read all day. He makes a real effort to keep his personal views out of the picture and rely on interviews and statistics. Even though it seems that he likely sees most large water projects as foolhardy and boondoggles he presents both sides - for example highlighting how one of the massive Comubia River dams had the unexpected value of helping us win WWII through power generation. I read this for a book club and the four of us (all California natives) used it as a springboard for literally hours of conversation. This should be required reading for anyone who claims to be an informed citizen living in the American West. There is also an excellent PBS companion 4 video series of the same name which I found available at my library (or sold through .com packaged with Chinatown) which I would HIGHLY recommend. It adds a lot thorough interviews, footage of a dam failing, and beautiful scenery that

lets you appreciate the natural beauty at stake when considering these large water projects.

I am somewhat ashamed to have read this book only recently. I should have read this one years ago. Well, better late than never, and I am pleased to report that it deserves its enduring reputation.... But let me assume that I am writing this "review" for an audience that is neither familiar with Reisner's book nor aware of the role water development has played in every aspect of the history of the American West, particularly of California. Briefly, the history of water development contains the whole story of the West, from start to present. Early modern irrigation worked miracles and opened to the plow land previously unavailable for agriculture -- land that now feeds the nation and much of the world. If it were not for these early, massive hydro-projects, not one of the great cities of the West would be even conceivable, millions upon millions of people would and could never have considered settling the western half of the continent. Of course, there was a massive cost accompanying all of these benefits, measurable in human as well as environmental terms, but in those days the cost-benefit analysis was easy. Building upon early irrigation successes, two government agencies -- the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers, may they both live forever in infamy -- garnered unto themselves massive power and independence, which they used to keep on building dam after dam after dam. The problem was not so much (at the time the dams were built) that the environmental costs were higher with every dam, until there now remains no wild river beyond the hundredth meridian of any significance whatsoever, precious little habitat for migratory birds, mass extinctions, etc., etc., tragically etc.; the real problem (at the time the dams were built) was that the new dams brought no benefits whatsoever to stack up against their costs. Each new dam represented gratuitous environmental catastrophe, effected simply because water projects became the currency of pork barrel Congressional politics. And that's not the worst of it. Except for the Egyptian (the Nile River being a very special case), every civilization founded upon irrigation has always ended -- abruptly -- almost certainly due to the sudden and permanent despoliation of irrigated agricultural soil through concentration of salts, which is the inevitable result of irrigation. No previous irrigation civilization has ever worked on such a grand scale, or with soil already so alkaline, as ours. Death by salinity is happening with alarming rapidity in the American West even now. The end of agriculture as we know it in the West is coming, and coming soon; all the experts know it; nothing is being done. Reisner doesn't suggest much in the way of solutions. But as history -- explaining patterns of human settlement, the effects of that settlement on the region's geography, the patterns of flow and accumulation of wealth in the West, and what may be the greatest crisis our whole nation is facing and ignoring today -- Cadillac Desert

can't be beat.

Cadillac Desert should be required reading for every American. On the surface it tells the story of water development and conservation (or lack thereof) in the American west in particular and the nation in general. Throughout the book however, you are given an understanding of how our government actually works. I always wondered why a company in California will contribute heavily to a congressman from New York. Now I know. I also know why our government will spend so much tax money on seemingly wasteful projects. Anyone interested in engineering will be fascinated by the construction of the huge dams. Marc Reisner also relates some of the disasters that resulted from poorly constructed or situated dams. This book is well researched and well written and for a book with so much technical information, quite easy and enjoyable to read. Anyone interested in water conservation, irrigation, American government, American history, engineering feats or development of the American west will love this book

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