



Pacific Southwest Book Club

Where the Water Goes by David Owen

6:30-7:30 PM PT on December 1, 2022

Zoom Meeting Details (will be the same for every meeting)

Meeting Schedule

Date	Chapters	Number of Pages
12/01/22	Chapter 15: The Salton Sea Chapter 16: Reclamation Chapter 17: The Delta Chapter 18: What Is to Be Done	75

Discussion Questions

Use these questions as a starting point or come up with your own questions. Join us for our last book club get together on December 1, no matter where you are in the book. We'll celebrate our time together and reflect on all we've discussed this fall!

Chapter 15: The Salton Sea

1. Michael Cohen's assessment of ecological interventions on behalf of the Salton Sea seems soberingly on target: "One of the challenges with the Salton Sea—which I think is emblematic of a lot of the water problems in the West—is that any effort to protect it is really an effort to stop natural processes, and that requires a project with inputs in perpetuity. But doing that has virtually no constituency, and as a result we have an impending ecological crisis that is ignored by almost everyone" (197-98).

Is it possible to let "nature take its course?" If so, how does that look?

2. "There's a lot of indifference to the Salton Sea, because it's not viewed as a natural ecosystem," Michael Cohen says. "But for the birds that fly over that's an arbitrary distinction. They see water in the desert and they use it, regardless of where it came from" (197). What kind of stewardship obligations do we assume for such environments, whether or not they may be called "natural"?

Chapter 16: Reclamation

1. It's striking to realize that "Mexico's right to use the water from the Colorado River didn't become official, as far as the United States was concerned, until 1944, when the two countries signed a treaty that set Mexico's annual entitlement at 1.5 million acre-feet" (205)—and that it wasn't until thirty years later that the U.S. agreed to guarantee not only "quantity" but also "quality" with the passage of the 1974 Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Act (212). We also learn that prior to 1944 "many Americans believed that Mexico had no legal right at all to water from the Colorado" (205)—and that there are currently "those who object to any safety

measures at all” on the All-American Canal, “in effect arguing that attempted undocumented entry into the United States ought to be a capital offense” (210).

What value system(s) do the international treaties, laws, and beliefs mentioned in this chapter represent?

2. What were the values that shaped Theodore Roosevelt’s vision of water “conservation” in the early 20th century?

Chapter 17: The Delta

1. “The Ciénega is an accident, but it’s the largest section of the delta that functions anything like the way the whole thing used to, and its existence shows how much can be accomplished, ecologically, with a relatively modest amount of water. Hinojosa Huerta has estimated that diverting as little as one percent of the Colorado’s historical flow into the delta on a more or less permanent basis could be enough to restore 200,000 acres of wetland and reestablish a permanent link to the sea” (225). Owen’s account of the Ciénega (which closes the chapter) seems to be an uplifting counter to Cohen’s assessment of the plight of the Salton Sea (which closes chapter 15).

In what ways are the Ciénega and the Salton Sea comparable and/or distinct, and what does this juxtaposition leave you thinking?

Chapter 18: What Is to Be Done

1. What is the actual meaning of the water allotments as they exist today, if that water does not truly exist?
2. Do you think that the big push of climate change and a drier American West will finally topple the pyramid of compacts and state agreements?
3. Is desalination a solution or just another means to support more unsustainable development?
4. How does “stabilizing” the California delta region impact on the Colorado River?

Etcetera

1. I made our [Wakelet](#) public! Is there anything else you want to add? Anything we should remove? If so, email me at dharrington@marinesanctuary.org. Most recent addition: [The Largest Dam Demolition in History is Approved for a Western River](#)