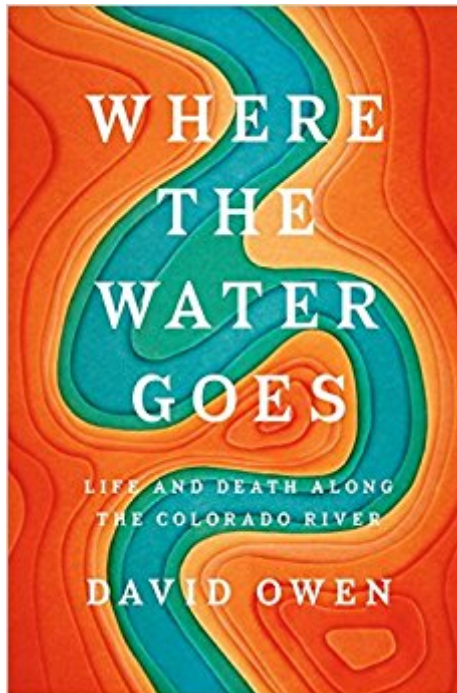




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# Where The Water Goes: Life And Death Along The Colorado River



## Synopsis

An eye-opening account of where our water comes from and where it all goes. The Colorado River is an essential resource for a surprisingly large part of the United States, and every gallon that flows down it is owned or claimed by someone. David Owen traces all that water from the Colorado's headwaters to its parched terminus, once a verdant wetland but now a million-acre desert. He takes readers on an adventure downriver, along a labyrinth of waterways, reservoirs, power plants, farms, fracking sites, ghost towns, and RV parks, to the spot near the U.S.-Mexico border where the river runs dry. Water problems in the western United States can seem tantalizingly easy to solve: just turn off the fountains at the Bellagio, stop selling hay to China, ban golf, cut down the almond trees, and kill all the lawyers. But a closer look reveals a vast man-made ecosystem that is far more complex and more interesting than the headlines let on. The story Owen tells in *Where the Water Goes* is crucial to our future: how a patchwork of engineering marvels, byzantine legal agreements, aging infrastructure, and neighborly cooperation enables life to flourish in the desert and the disastrous consequences we face when any part of this tenuous system fails.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Owen has the keen observation of a birder combined with the breezy writing to draw you in with unusual insights. . . . As Owen shows, the Colorado River is a great, sad, terrifying, possibly hopeful example of the pervasive, permanent mark people are making on the planet."

•The New York Times Book Review• “This wonderfully written book covers issue that will, or should, give you a headache. But it is a good headache, one that makes you a more informed person. Mr. Owen writes about water, but in these polarized times the lessons he shares spill into other arenas. The world of water rights and wrongs along the Colorado River offers hope for other problems.

•Wall Street Journal• “Owen is effortlessly engaging, informally parceling out information about acre-foot allotments alongside sketches of notable, often dreadful figures in the river’s history | Where the Water Goes • doesn’t pretend to solve the problems Owen acknowledges are overwhelming and, in some ways, impossible. It’s a restless travelogue of long-term human impact on the natural world, and how politics and economics have as much to do with redirecting rivers as any canal. But with its historical eddies, policy asides, and trips to the Hoover Dam, at heart • Where the Water Goes • is about water as a function of time, and a reminder that we’re running out of both.

•NPR.org• “Where the Water Goes makes an eloquent argument for addressing the impact of human inhabitants on the natural world.

•BBC.com• “Part road-trip documentary, part memoir, and part geopolitical and hydrology lesson, author David Owen’s book follows the historical and geographic course of the river, the water it carries, and the lives that depend on it | [Owen] effectively describes the links between historic precedents, choices, and events that led the river and the millions of people who depend upon it to the present state.

•Science Magazine• “The story Owen tells in Where the Water Goes is crucial to our future.

•Boulder Daily Camera• “David Owen’s new book, • Where the Water Goes: Life and Death Along the Colorado River | handles its sprawling subject with deftness and quirkiness | Owen delves into the history and politics of the much-dammed, over-allocated river, as well as the arcana of Western water law and the weirdness of RV culture, without losing sight of larger questions about the sustainability of America’s efforts to make the desert bloom.

•Westword• “This gorgeous new book is a compelling and fascinating read about the Colorado River, a crucial water source for a surprisingly large portion of the United States. David Owen, with utmost elegance and wry wit, examines the river from headwaters to terminus and all the stops along the way.

•BookPeople’s Blog• “Mr. Owen owns our attention. We have a lot to learn, but this is not a textbook. Mr. Owen offers a detail-rich travelogue, an amalgam of memoir and journalism and history.

•Wall Street Journal• “[A] revealing investigation of hydroecology in extremis. . . Rather than simply bemoan environmental degradation, Owen presents a deeper, more useful analysis of the subtle interplay between natural and human needs.

•Publishers Weekly• “An

essential read for not only the environmentally minded but also citizens who are curious about where their water comes from. Highly recommended.

•Library Journal

“Owen offers a wealth of engrossing and often surprising details about the complicated nature of water rights, recreational usage (worth \$26 billion a year), and depletion threats from climate change and the fracking industry. With water shortages looming across the globe, Owen’s work provides invaluable lessons on the rewards and pitfalls involved in managing an essential natural resource.

•Booklist

“It’s a rare writer who can explain the inexplicable, but David Owen manages to do just that. Where the Water Goes is at once informative, entertaining, and unsparing

•essential reading for anyone who cares about the American West.

•Elizabeth Kolbert, author of *The Sixth Extinction*

“Fascinating, thoughtful, and wise. David Owen is an extraordinarily gifted writer.

•Bill Bryson, author of *The Road to Little Dribbling* and *A Walk in the Woods*

“An important work that brings the questions surrounding water use in the American Southwest forward to the era of climate change. With humor, an acute eye, and un-showy skill, Owen has written a book that deserves to stand with Marc Reisner’s classic, *Cadillac Desert*.

•Ian Frazier, author of *Great Plains*, *On the Rez*, and *Hogs Wild*

“I have traveled the American West all of my life and thought that I knew everything about its fabled water wars. But David Owen fills in so many gaps that I feel that I’ve been to water reeducation camp. Whether you read for fun, or edification, this is a gem.

•Rinker Buck, author of *The Oregon Trail: A New American Journey*

David Owen is a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and the author more than a dozen books. He lives in northwest Connecticut with his wife, the writer Ann Hodgman.

Where The Water Goes is ostensibly a driving tour of the Colorado River, from its tributary headwaters to Baja in Mexico where it is supposed to end. Owen drives and describes the scenery and the various characters he meets (sometimes with his family), and fills in the history and significance of the location. But where it gets really interesting is in the legislatures and the courts, where the water has a completely different status. There is real water and there is paper water. There are negotiated agreements and there is The Law Of The River, which seems to be whatever the legislator or lawyer talking wants it to be. And you don’t want to bring The Law Of The River to court. The book is most informative when paper water properties rear their heads. It’s not logical, intuitive, direct, simple, or efficient. And no one dares tamper with it

lest the whole house of cards come tumbling down. In Arizona, new developments can be built and sold without service or access to water. Owners have to go pick it up and bring it back as needed. In Colorado, the water that runs off your roof is not yours and you have no right to retain it. At the state level, there is a race to consume the allocation, lest it be reduced and grabbed by another state. And by the time the river gets to Mexico, there is literally nothing left. In the mean time, agriculture still flood-irrigates, and cities keep expanding. Deserts don't mean no one can live or farm; they just have to divert more water. Incredibly, the locals argue about exporting agricultural products as if they were exporting the water in them. It's all very Alice in Wonderland. The whole arrangement was originally built on faulty data; the river system cannot produce what it says on paper. The big reservoirs are so low they constantly need to retain all the water they can, leaving little or nothing trickling down the system. Canals and other diversions pervert nature. Dams cause more problems than they solve. Worst of all is the first come first served arrangement, whereby those who have the oldest permits get all the water they're allowed before newer participants can take any. In perpetuity. This is how the West was built. None of this is news and Owen cites numerous predecessors in trying to explain it (but not rationalize it. No one can do that). Owen ends by making recommendations he knows full well no one will ever consider. It's a remarkable trip. David Wineberg

"Lake Havasu marks the beginning of the final and most complex stage of the transformation of the Colorado River from a natural stream into a dispersed and brachiating resource-distribution system. At the lake's southern end, some water is diverted west, to Southern California, and some is diverted east to central Arizona, and some continues downstream to diversions further south. The lake was created in 1938 by the construction of the Parker Dam, a graceful concrete curve roughly 750 feet from end to end, topped by a blocky colonnade. The website of the Bureau of Reclamation describes Parker Dam as "one part of a system of storage and diversion structures built by Reclamation to control and regulate the once unruly Colorado River, but it was really built to provide water for metropolitan Los Angeles, nearly 350 miles to the west." Being from the Northeast water shortages are happily one of the farthest things from my mind. Although I have heard about "water rights" in feature films and old TV westerns I knew precious little about the subject. Furthermore, I have always been fascinated about how the American Southwest was ultimately settled and the major role that water played in determining winners and losers. Who were the

visionaries who saw the enormous potential of this once arid region and what role did politics play in determining how events unfolded? What obstacles had to be overcome? And just how does all of that water get to Southern California? As you might imagine this an extremely broad and complicated topic that presents a multiplicity of conflicting issues. David Owen is a staff writer for the New Yorker and the author of more than a dozen books. He has obviously done his due diligence and presents his findings in the thoughtful and informative new book *Where the Water Goes: Life and Death Along the Colorado River*. You will discover that the issues depicted here are ongoing and ever-changing. I simply could not put this one down. It is certainly difficult for the average person to grasp the enormity of these issues without having at least a passing knowledge of the key components of the massive water diversion system that brings all of this water to central Arizona and southern California. In *Where the Water Goes* you will get a crash course in important places like Hoover Dam, Lake Havasu, Parker Dam, the Colorado River Aqueduct, Lake Powell, Imperial Dam, the Salton Sea and the Central Arizona Project and the role that each plays in getting the mission accomplished. You will also be introduced to terminology that will enhance your understanding of the issues involved. And in the final chapter called *What Is to Be Done?* David Owen offers some possible options to ease troublesome water scarcity both in the short run and in the long term. I found *Where the Water Goes: Life and Death Along the Colorado River* to be a real eye-opener that really enhanced my knowledge of these most important issues. At several points along the way I enhanced my reading by viewing some YouTube videos. I would especially recommend a documentary made in the 1930s called *Colorado River Aqueduct* which really helped me to visualize what was actually going on. *Where the Water Goes* would be an excellent choice for history buffs, those concerned about the environment and general readers alike. Very highly recommended!

Bought for my husband...he couldn't put it down.

There is much to like in *Where the Water Goes*, David Owen's new book about "life and death along the Colorado River", but the thing I liked most was the bemused charm with which Owen himself confronts western water's absurdities, which must be embraced, but which are easily taken for granted. His decision to categorize it as *General Western US Travel Guides* seems odd,

but makes a certain amount of sense. It is travelogue in structure, as Owen takes us from the Colorado River's headwaters to the sea. But there is a rich layer beneath this, as he also educates us about the complexities of the strange world of western water. This strange stuff concludes with the recognition that the Colorado River's problems really are hard, not amenable to easy fixes "rewrite the Law of the River" or "abandon prior appropriation/Imperial/Las Vegas" narratives, and it is to Owens' credit that he ably sums up this no-easy-fixes reality. Even water nerds who think they know everything about the Colorado River will likely learn stuff they didn't know, but they're not the book's primary audience. Where the Water Goes is a water book for everyone else.

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