

Source-to-Sea on the Colorado River: The Meaning and Merits of a Popular (and Recurring) Adventure Narrative

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Stories are powerful communicators that bridge science, policy, and practice. Narratives draw people together in common cause, convey empirical findings, influence how we define policy problems, and influence our behavior. When it comes to the Colorado River, one narrative has appeared persistently over the decades and especially in recent years: the story of the source-to-sea expedition, tracing the river from headwaters to (dry) delta. From Hopi storytellers to the Kolb Brothers (1914), Frank Waters (1941), Philip Fradkin (1981), Colin Fletcher (1996), Jonathan Waterman (2010), William Stauffer-Norris and Zak Podmore (2012), Pete McBride (2012), and David Owens (2017), the Colorado River source-to-sea adventure tale is one that has been told many times over. Here we ask, and endeavor to answer, a simple question: *What's the story with this story?* We present a narrative analysis that explores its evolution, its messages, and its influence. We argue that, since the 1980s, the Colorado River source-to-sea narrative has been working to fill a scientific measurement gap – however imperfectly – by aiming to provide a full accounting of cumulative human impacts on the Colorado River system. We discuss what this narrative accounting helps us see, what it leaves invisible, and how it fares in charting a path toward a more sustainable future for the Colorado River.