

2021 Upper Colorado River Basin Forum

Title: "Tributary Voices and Rhetorical Listening: A Paradigm for Inclusionary Water Management"

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As the lifeline to more than approximately 40 million people, the Colorado faces endless challenges as attitudes and behaviors about the river and the arid West more broadly continue to draw upon notions of the region as frontier, garden, and wilderness. Over the last century and a half, these three mythic perspectives have privileged a narrow range of interests and practices while disregarding those that fall outside the mainstream vision expressed by these myths. As a result, they have urged the reclamation of the region's arid lands, as well as the need to preserve cherished landscapes at the expense of others. In addition, these myths have fostered the central role of science, law, and policy in shaping attitudes and the land. The result has been a crisis of representation, one in which there are many competing visions of the Colorado's value. Such realities impede our ability to have more egalitarian and comprehensive management practices. Today's water resource challenge demand additional perspectives to foster a more sustainable relationship with the river.

My presentation initiates a broader discussion about Colorado River use by examining the contributions the environmental humanities can make to water governance. A growing awareness exists among many of those working to solve environmental challenges that science cannot be the singular voice in shaping environmental outcomes. While the best science is needed to inform our decisions, we also need a more informed water literacy that understands how people think, feel, and communicate about water. Drawing on scholarship from the environmental humanities and environmental policy, I argue for the value of what I call "tributary voices," or the neglected and lesser-known perspectives of the river that have been traditionally relegated to a figurative backwater, and their use of narrative or story to articulate their respective stakeholder positions. These stories, evident in Latino/a and Indigenous perspectives about the Colorado, for example, offer important insights into how a broader range of stakeholders interact with the river. In sum, they reflect an alternative management paradigm where a broader range of values informs water decision making. Engaging these stories through rhetorical listening, a concept scholar Krista Radcliffe forwards to enhance cross-cultural understanding, we invite a more inclusive approach to managing the Colorado's future.