



**Book Review**  
**Water for Life: Water Management and  
Environmental Policy**

**By: Kristan Cockerill**

**No abstract**

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# **Water for Life: Water Management and Environmental Policy**

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*Water for Life: Water Management and Environmental Policy*. James L. Wescoat, Jr. and Gilbert F. White. Cambridge University Press. 2003. ISBN 0-521-36980-0 (pbk). 322 pages.

For seven decades Gilbert F. White has been a strong voice for environmentally sound water management. He and James L. Wescoat have delivered a fine volume to continue that theme. Despite a few shortcomings, the authors have taken a significant step forward in producing an accessible text that addresses the complexity inherent in applying scientific knowledge, social attitudes, and constant vigilance to water management and environmental policy efforts. This is an excellent primer for anyone who is just getting their feet wet, so to speak, on these issues. It is thoroughly illustrated and flooded with citations. Additionally, the 35-page guide to Internet resources is a treasure trove for researchers, students and teachers.

The book's structure sets the tone for its message. Rather than opening with the scientific information, as many texts do, Wescoat and White first introduce historical and social aspects as being integral to water management and environmental policy. The second chapter, *Challenge and Opportunity*, summarizes issues that water managers face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, concluding that the challenge is "to identify which combinations of research and administrative policy offer promising opportunities to exercise genuinely positive methods of achieving a sustainable world." Flowing from that, the third chapter, *Unfolding Recognition of Ecosystem Change*, provides an excellent overview of the connections among people, water and the natural environment—past and present. Encapsulating one of the book's key messages, this chapter concludes, "Natural waters are not just H<sub>2</sub>O cycling through the biosphere, but waters that give life to, constitute cherished habitats for, and are precariously transformed by all of the creatures of the biosphere, with varying degrees of recognition, consciousness, and sound judgment."

The authors have infused the book with historical information. The opening chapter provides a summary of how humans have approached water management throughout history, moving from simple personal withdrawals from rivers and lakes to constructing large scale, multi-purpose dams. In several places the authors discuss water

management activities with long histories (e.g. greywater use, rainwater harvesting, non-structural alternatives) that are being re-introduced in modern society. Even in the chapters explaining water sources the authors invoke history. They do not simply present the hydrological cycle as we understand it today, for example, they also note how our understanding has evolved over time. In discussing urban drainage issues, Wescoat and White invoke Roman water laws and Greek geographers to highlight that our concern about this issue “has ancient roots.” Through these passages, the authors suggest that we do not often enough internalize lessons from the past.

Related to this historical relevance, is the consistent attention to the lack of “ex-post evaluation” of water management efforts. The authors note that for all of the environmental assessments related to proposed dams, there have been very few studies of the *actual* impacts after a dam was built. They then thoroughly discuss the value in studying past efforts to learn what has worked, what has not and if not, why not. In the chapter, Impounded Rivers and Reservoirs, the authors rely heavily on reports from the World Commission on Dams to make their point about the importance of evaluating impacts once a dam (or any management technique) has been employed.

After the steady stream of historical insight and the excellent early chapter stressing the importance of social values, the authors disappoint with their treatment of decision-making. The chapter, Decision Processes, provides a sufficient overview of types of decision-making processes from individual to societal levels, but it fails to discuss “real world” constraints in decision-making, including political infighting, culture clashes, dominant personalities and inertia inherent in stable political systems. Applying hindsight, we often find that poor policies did not result from lack of knowledge or lack of appropriate technology, but have often been driven by political or social values. For example, environmental historians have documented that in the western US, most major dams did not pass economic muster, even at the time they were being proposed. Social values, such as the idea of technology as savior, along with dominant personalities in Congress and Federal agencies created an atmosphere that deemed the dams “good” despite their economic shortcomings. Such contextual analysis is not present in this chapter. To use a key point from the book as another example, ages old approaches to water management are making a comeback, but the authors do not discuss why they faded in the first place. What historical events, social values, and individual personalities affected decisions to move away from particular approaches and toward others? The authors do acknowledge that politics affect the decision process. Specifically, they write that 18<sup>th</sup> century efforts to apply scientific methods to regional water administration encountered “political obstacles that persist to the present day...” and a few pages later comment that a multiple criteria approach to water and environmental management was “applied at the national, river basin, and project scales, up until its repeal for largely political reasons in 1983.” Without providing further details about these political “obstacles” and “reasons” there remains a serious drought in our understanding of decision-making processes.

Following this disappointing chapter, the book ends on a positive note by discussing Integrative Approaches. The authors present watershed management, adaptive environmental management, and global environmental management as three approaches that show promise in improving our water and environment management attempts. With solid information about current efforts to re-view our ideas about water and the environment, readers are left with hope that all is not lost, that we can find a way to sustain the natural waters that enable us, and all life, to sustain ourselves.