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BOOK REVIEWS

WATER WARS: DROUGHT, FLOOD, FOLLY AND THE POLITICS OF THIRST

By Diane Raines Ward

Riverhead Books 2002. \$14.00.

Reviewed by Liz Klein*

Perhaps no other issue better illuminates the clash between economic development and environmental conservation than the situation in the Everglades. Billions of dollars and countless numbers of hours are currently being spent to reverse the devastation that has been wrought in Florida's southern tip as a result of centuries of poor engineering and ignorance of the area's intricate ecosystem. As Diane Raines Ward points out in her epilogue to *Water Wars*, "[t]he fight to reverse what human beings have done there has become the biggest political battle and engineering initiative in American history." And this multi-billion dollar clash in the Everglades involves one simple resource – water.

It is incredibly easy to take water for granted. Most of us, particularly those living on the east coast of the United States, have a ready supply of running water and likely spend little time worrying about our access to it or whether it's safe and healthy to consume. This luxury is not the reality for many in the world, however, a point that Ms. Ward's *Water Wars* makes clear.

In her sweeping and fascinating overview of some of the most vexing water issues facing the world today, Ms. Ward continually emphasizes the fact that access to safe, clean water is a problem that increases in magnitude every day. As she points out, "[s]ince the middle of the last century, while the population doubled, water use has tripled. At the same time, we have dirtied that water with human, industrial, and agricultural wastes." In too many places around the world, managing, finding and ensuring the safety of water has become an enormous burden, and too frequently this task is undertaken without considering the far reaching effects of man's efforts on the environment.

Ms. Raines explores the problems of water management from the arid western United States, with its history of reclamation projects and the current problems facing burgeoning cities such as Las Vegas, to the struggles in India and Pakistan over access to water in the Indus Basin. She explores the controversy surrounding dam construction throughout the world, providing case studies from various countries in a manner that is respectful of the human ingenuity that contributed to many of

these engineering marvels but realistic in her assessment of the destruction that many have caused. As she points out, "[a] dam shouldn't come down just because it's there, any more than a river should be dammed simply because it can be." As *Water Wars* makes clear, a more sophisticated understanding of our surrounding ecosystem along with increased collaboration between engineers and environmentalists is crucial to the future of water management.

Ms. Raines provides historical accounts of water projects in countries around the world as well as assessments of the current state of affairs. Throughout the book, she manages to frame the issue of development versus conservation in a balanced fashion, providing examples of projects that have succeeded in managing water in an environmentally sustainable manner. Such examples include the use of industrial recycling systems that catch used water and use it again, a practice that has been adopted by corporations such as Hewlett-Packard and Xerox. She also briefly discusses the controversial issues surrounding water markets and how many believe that governments and communities might more effectively manage their water if it is treated as an economic commodity.

If there is a criticism of *Water Wars* it is only that it will likely leave most interested readers wanting more depth and more specifics about particular water projects. Her piecemeal approach to the book, however, illustrates an important point – lessons learned in one area of the world could be vitally important to governments, engineers and environmentalists who are interested in avoiding disasters such as the Everglades from occurring again.

Water Wars is an accessible and ideal book for anyone interested in an introduction to the many issues surrounding water management and is the ideal starting point for anyone dedicated to solving the tremendous water problems facing the world today.



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