

Water Follies

by Robert Glennon, Island Press, \$20.00

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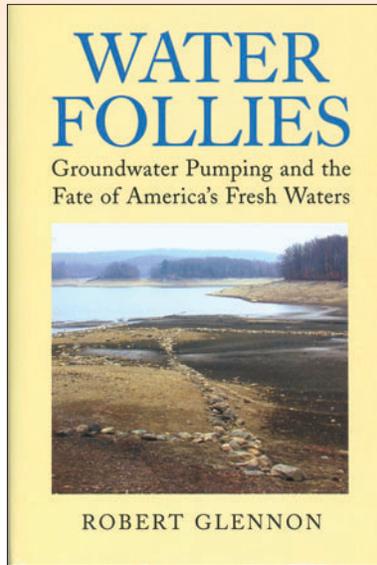
An environmental law attorney representing mining interests once noted that “Smokey the Bear doesn’t give a darn what’s in the groundwater.” But as Robert Glennon’s new book, “Water Follies: Groundwater Pumping and the Fate of America’s Fresh Waters” makes clear, groundwater pumping can have profound environmental consequences.

Glennon wears many hats in this book, including historian, legal scholar, environmental commentator, explainer of basic hydrologic principles, and policy analyst. He deftly switches hats throughout the book, but he is at his best as a story teller. Each chapter tells a tale of human desire – for drinking pure spring water, mining rich gold deposits, eating perfect French fries, pursuing economic development, or creating the illusion of flowing water in the desert – and how the pursuit of these desires has seriously impacted springs, streams, and rivers across the United States.

A historian and the Morris K. Udall Professor of Law and Public Policy at the University of Arizona, Glennon shares his broad knowledge of the subject while keeping academic tendencies in check. He eschews footnotes but provides encyclopedic bibliography, glossary and index. The larger and more formidable challenge is providing technically correct and reasonably complete descriptions of complex hydrologic and social situations in a manner that can be understood by the general public.

Glennon makes no bones about his environmental sympathies, even providing an index of “individuals fighting to make a difference” and organizations that “deserve our gratitude” and “need support.” Yet he never preaches, relying instead on humor and insight and consistently presenting all sides of the issues. Mixed with warnings of impending environmental disasters is a note of hope, almost optimism. Some of the stories are of disasters averted, or promising new approaches. Many environmental consequences are avoidable, some reversible. The final chapter outlines an approach for addressing these problems and calls for a pragmatic balancing act between governmental command-and-control approaches and market-based incentives.

The book’s jacket states “Quite remarkably, no books or magazines have focused on this issue.” It’s a startling, seemingly incredible claim. The literature is clogged with articles



describing aspects of particular groundwater - surface water interactions. Yet this is in fact the first publication to provide a thorough overview of these issues, and do it in a way that is accessible to the general public.

Hydrologists and other water resources professionals may find some small nits to pick with a specific technical description or explanation. But overall, Glennon has pulled off a most difficult task – penning a book that renders the obscure subject of groundwater understandable, even entertaining. Water professionals will find it a fascinating read, and might consider purchasing it for that friend or relative who has never understood what your chosen profession is all about.

“Water Follies” is sure to both widen and deepen the debate on how we manage and mis-manage our groundwater resources. For that reason alone, this book is an enormous public service.

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