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Talk of the Town: Water running out - and so is time

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In her book, "Blue Revolution - Unmaking America's Water Crisis" (Beacon Press, 2011), award-winning journalist and environmental author Cynthia Barnett describes in detail the unsustainable way we are using our most precious natural resource, and then declares that a new national water ethic is called for if we are to avoid a future catastrophe.

"America needs nothing less than a revolution in how we use water. We must change not only the wasteful ways we consume water in our homes, businesses, farms and energy plants, but also the inefficient ways we move water to and away from them. This revolution will bring about the ethical use of water in every sector. Such an ethic is as essential - and as possible - as past awakenings to threats against our environment and ourselves on the large scale, the way we halted the use of DDT and other deadly chemicals; in our communities, the way we stopped tossing litter out car windows and trashing public parks; and, at the family level, the way we got used to setting out recycling bins alongside the garbage."

In addition to our unconsciously wasteful use of water, "Blue Revolution" points to a number of factors that are nudging the country toward critical water shortages (all relevant to our region): exponential increases in population (sharply increased demand); climate change (decreased supply along with increased demand); and the fact that these changes are coming at us very quickly.

Unfortunately, our natural-resource planning and decision-making apparatus is not equipped to deal with rapid change, particularly in the arid Southwest. The Scripps Institution of Oceanography recently published a paper titled, "When Will Lake Mead Go Dry?" The authors, a marine physicist and a climate scientist, quantified the water-storage risks to the largest reservoir in the United States and said they were "stunned" not only by the magnitude of this problem, but also by how rapidly it was approaching.

Barnett and others have pointed out that the primary reason Americans believe that we will always have plenty of fresh water is the persistence of "The Illusion of Water Abundance." We learn in elementary school that two-thirds of the surface of our planet is covered with water. So how could we ever run out of the stuff?

We could run out of time! "The Illusion of Water Abundance" is only one part of this complex problem. The other part could be called "The Illusion That We Have Plenty of Time to Resolve This Issue." There is credible evidence that Lake Mead is headed toward a significant near-term reduction of the amount of water in storage, yet many people cling to the hope that we have more than enough time to solve not only that vexing water problem, but many others, too.

"Blue Revolution" demonstrates how a "water ethic" can be an effective solution by using site-specific examples (San Antonio, Texas; Monterey, California; Singapore) to show that if a water ethic is embraced at all levels of a community - including government officials willing to make the necessary changes to inadequate state policies and water laws - it can remedy even serious threats to water resources. That's the good news. The bad news is that the communities the author uses as examples did not adequately anticipate the serious problem that was headed their way nor do any useful advance planning. They waited

until the last possible moment to act, always the most expensive and least enduring response.

Barnett makes the point that every region is unique and therefore must create a customized water ethic that reflects local conditions. But she does mention two universal concepts. First, avoid overusing aquifers and surface waters and, at the same time, try not to repeat "fixes" used in the past that result in unintended consequences for future generations (more and deeper wells, pipelines transporting high-cost water from remote sources). Second, leave as much environmental water (aquifers, wetlands, and rivers) in place as possible.

And finally, Barnett reminds us that citizens will not embrace a water ethic unless everyone in the community of stakeholders is on board, all of us in the boat, rowing as a team. A water ethic cannot be defined solely by science or law or economics. To be effective, the definition must include our beliefs, our motivations and, above all, our collective values.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group, the Verde River Basin Partnership and other water-focused organizations have begun to do this work but we need more voices at the table. We need you.

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