



Summer 1970

Strategies of American Water Management, by Gilbert F. White

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Recommended Citation

Jack L. Knetsch, *Strategies of American Water Management, by Gilbert F. White*, 10 Nat. Resources J. 644 (1970).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol10/iss3/12>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Strategies of American Water Management

By

GILBERT F. WHITE

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969

Pp. ix, 155, \$5.95.

We continue to have water resources problems in this country and to have an outpouring of books that document the problem and point towards means of improvement. Many of these are among the best in the natural resources literature. White's small volume, drawn from material presented as a series of William W. Cook lectures on American institutions at the University of Michigan, is also a useful and interesting book.

The author's stated theme is "that by examining how people make their choices in managing water from place to place and time to time we can deepen our understanding of the process of water management, and thereby aid in finding more suitable ends and means of manipulating the natural water system." The volume is separated into six chapters and some interesting appendix material. Of the latter, a chronology of selected events in American water management is particularly helpful.

The first chapter sets out the nature of the problems we face with respect to water and what we seem to be doing about them. The point is made that some of our projections about running out of water may be self-fulfilling, for in our attempts to do something about it we set forces into motion which in time will only worsen the situation. As White observes, "it is more likely that human welfare in the United States will be impaired through degradation of water quality or through inept management than from a physical scarcity of water."

In the second chapter, White defines strategies as being a distinctive combination of aims, means, and decision criteria. He then begins to trace our evolving strategies, beginning with single purpose construction and illustrating this with a discussion of rural water supply and navigation. In this chapter he introduces one of the major difficulties that pervades many of our problems in water; namely, the divergence in the incidence of benefits and costs of water development. Local groups indeed gauge the importance of proposals from the viewpoint of gains to the local economy, and while Congress is

primarily concerned with national gains, it is also sensitive to the effects on individual regions.

The next chapter introduces the multiple purpose project and the concern with multiple means, using flood control as an illustration. Among the difficulties White sees is the reluctance to consider alternative means of dealing with given problems such as flood control.

The fourth chapter deals with many of the means of resolving conflicts and establishing goals of water development. Water quality is used as the vehicle but a good bit of the history of water institutions is included.

The next chapter is an extremely interesting one in which Professor White brings in research as a tool in water management. He outlines the enormous potentials that may stem from using research and traces some of the timid approaches which have been made in the past. He observes, for example, that "if research were accepted as a major water management tool along with dams, treatment plants, and pricing schedules, the character of water management would be bound to change in several basic ways." He contends that we would certainly build far more flexibility into our programs, make more allowance for technological change, be far less capital intensive in our development activities, and make far more use of social instruments in addressing water problems. While the use of research has been very limited in the past, he is optimistic about the prospect for rapid expansion in the future.

In the last chapter he deals with regional integration, linear projections and finite resources. This is a very instructive chapter in which he suggests that our aims and concerns in water resources are increasing; witness the increasing awareness of the importance of environmental values. Further, the spatial extent of our concerns is likewise expanding. No longer can we look at single projects in isolation. The concern is with whole regions and their impacts on other regions as well. White increasingly sees difficulty with the use of simple linear projects of water resources demands. He gives a very instructive exposition of the fallacy of this exercise.

Although the book recognizes many of the generic difficulties of water problems, the almost total absence of any discussion of the role of cost sharing and repayment policy was somewhat surprising. Although not totally absent, the pervasive influence of the current incidence of benefits and costs are underplayed throughout.

For the most part, there is not all that much that is new in this volume, but it does look at the more familiar problems in the historical perspective of changing demands on our water resources and changing institutional accommodations that have evolved over time.

Because it is given by someone with the involvement and insights of Professor White, the review is especially informative. This will be a welcome addition to the many reading lists which acquaint students with the myriad of problems in the field, how our institutions for dealing with them have evolved, and where many of the gaps remain.

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