



Thursday, 12 November 1998

Myopia on the Colorado

A river is a single living thing - to heal its flow you must heal its delta.

Environmentalists are right therefore to be incensed that the steering committee for an important effort to repair the much-abused Colorado River has scuttled a plan to consider the needs of the river's dried-out Mexican delta.

Until recently, the so-called Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program has been a promising bid by the federal government, utilities and the states of Arizona, California and Nevada to revive river ecosystems while still providing for the continued operation of necessary dams and diversions.

The program began last year with the realization that the once-wild Colorado has been turned by dams into a string of biologically impoverished reservoirs since 1909. Through subsequent meetings, a sizable array of stakeholders initiated the work of trying to craft a holistic, 50-year scheme for protecting the species and resources of the Southwest's great river.

In keeping with that, it made perfect sense when environmentalists pushed this summer for the project to address one of the most deplorable aspects of the river's decline: the reduction by U.S. water withdrawals of the delta's once-vast complex of marshes and bird-filled lagoons to a wasteland of salt flats.

However, the program's steering committee has now rejected such inclusive thinking and in the process thrown the entire river planning push into flux.

This the governing panel has done by nixing a sound approach worked out by state water and power agencies and the conservationists in September.

Previously Tucson's Southwest Center for Biological Diversity and the national Defenders of Wildlife had pressed to expand the formal scope of the species program to include the delta, and to give Mexican parties representation on the steering committee. Ultimately the environmentalists compromised by settling with other parties for a simple study to identify conservation "needs and opportunities" in the delta. But now the program's steering committee has rejected even this tame initiative.

Such myopia makes no sense - and cries out for reconsideration.

Fairness by itself dictates concern for the Mexican reaches of the Colorado, after 90 years of American heedlessness. So, too, does that principle that demands land managers look to the good of whole ecosystems, not just local fragments. In view of that, the species program's American leaders absolutely must revisit a decision that calls into question the credibility of their entire venture.

Without water and respect south of the border, the river cannot be a real river. And without thought about that truth, the lower Colorado process cannot itself be real. The steering committee should do the Mexico conservation study.

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