

The 100th Meridian Project: Exploring Contemporary Water Issues in Historical Perspective

Principal Investigator: Rick Davis

The American West is parched. Drought has created a water emergency, leading to calls for radical action. What if we had had a warning about the consequences of unchecked development in a dry climate? Could we have prevented a situation that threatens the health of an entire ecosystem?

We had such a warning as early as the 1870s, thanks to John Wesley Powell, soldier, ethnologist, and director of USGS. Powell explored the Colorado River and concluded that the arid West was incapable of supporting substantial human populations at any distance from the main water sources.

In 1954, Wallace Stegner chronicled Powell's explorations in [Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the American West](#). With a novelist's eye for character and a biographer's attention to fact, Stegner brings us along on Powell's journey and illuminates his conclusions.

The 100th Meridian Project will take Stegner's book as a point of entry to a river more complex than the Colorado – the river of American history, whose tributaries include science, policy, finance – in an effort to understand why Powell's recommendations were ignored, and whether there are contemporary parallels to past centuries' willful rejection of sound scientific guidance.

Uniting students and faculty from the sciences, arts, and humanities, the Project brings the story of water ecology, land use, and public policy up to our present time and place. One result will be a multi-media performance uniting science and art to bring this critical problem to a general audience. Exhibits, seminars, and interactive media will surround the performance to engage further with this rich network of stories and issues. Subsequent performances, webcasts, and video dissemination will move the story beyond campus. Funders with an interest in the environment, science communication, and the arts will be solicited to help continue the work.

The Project proposes to discover not only new insights into how science is communicated, translated into action, or condemned to oblivion, but also to create a collaborative research protocol that can be applied in an ongoing process to any number of critical issues in the contemporary world.