

Water Politics and Cultural Difference: Fostering Community Relationships to Promote Environmental Health and Community Wellbeing in Times of Drought

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Graduate student Elise Trott's research includes participant observation with acequia activists protesting the Santolina development. Photo by Elise Trott.

NM WRI Student Water Research Grant Final Report

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Description of research problem and research objectives

In recent decades, both the scholarship and the politics of environmental and natural resource conflict have focused increasingly on culturally and economically marginalized populations, such as communities of color, as sources of alternative ideas about environmental health and potentially productive alliances around natural resource management. However, concepts of appropriate natural resource use are profoundly shaped by the different identities, experiences, and goals of different stakeholders, making inclusive and democratic water management difficult and often contradictory. This problem is especially relevant in the state of New Mexico where different rationalities of water management coexist in a time of extreme drought.

This qualitative research project focused on grassroots political organizing around New Mexico's *acequias* (communally-managed irrigation ditches) as a case to understand how local conceptions of water and water-sharing in relationship with ideas of environmental health and community wellbeing inform water conflict and the politics of water management in New Mexico. Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and *pláticas* (discussion groups) with acequia organizers in the Española Valley of Northern New Mexico and the South Valley of Albuquerque illuminated these local conceptions.

Description of methodology employed

The following qualitative methodologies have been employed in a number of sites in the Española Valley of Northern New Mexico and the South Valley of Albuquerque: 1) I have conducted participant observation at a number of events that involve acequia organizing, including farmer's markets, legislative training meetings, legislative sessions, protests, and public meetings. At these events, I have focused on observing and documenting ways that acequia users articulate ideas and concerns about natural resources, especially as they relate to concepts of health, family, community, culture, and economy. 2) I have conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews with a targeted sampling of acequia users focusing on concepts of water, environmental health, and community wellbeing. I am analyzing the data from this study qualitatively using an iterative process of open and focused coding. First, I am analyzing the data using open, line-by-line coding to locate central themes, narratives, and understandings relating to the central research questions. Then, I am using focused coding to further analyze the frequency of themes and which themes are of particular concern as they connect to issues that come to bear on the role of grassroots activism and water management.

Results and discussion

The organizing of *acequias* (communally-managed irrigation ditches) in New Mexico has much to offer to our understandings of water conflict and the politics of water management in New Mexico, as well as to other potentially marginalized groups who want to make their voices heard in decision-making about natural resource management. Spurred by state adjudication of water rights, political organizing of small New Mexico communities around their irrigation ditches began in the 1960s to protect the siphoning of water away from agriculture to development and industry. Since then, *Nuevomexicano* (Spanish- and Mexican-descendent), indigenous, and other groups, have banded together to influence water management in the state, focusing largely on preserving the water rights of mostly poor and rural farming communities in an environment where water is an increasingly scarce and coveted resource.

While political and economic processes tend to favor the water needs of urban growth and industrial development, acequia users and organizers have had some success in making their voices heard in water management. In 2003, they were instrumental in passing a Water Transfer Law under which applications to transfer water rights away from community ditches is now subject to the approval of community ditch associations. In the same year, the state legislature also authorized the use of “water banks,” which allowed unused water rights to be “banked” and used by other irrigators along the community ditch. These efforts have gone a long way in supporting the tradition of community water management, and the agricultural and riparian growth that acequias feed throughout the state. Nonetheless, acequia users are engaged in a number of struggles throughout the state to protect their conceptions of water and water-sharing. I highlight just two such struggles here, followed by a brief discussion of their importance for our understanding of water conflict and water management in New Mexico.

In 2012, small farmers, ranchers, gardeners, and environmental activists convened for the annual *Congreso de las Acequias* (Acequia Congress). The highly anticipated keynote speech was given by a recently appointed State Engineer. The speech was seemingly both friendly and unremarkable, with the speaker reviewing a pie chart of water usage in New Mexico, and outlining a new water management protocol that emphasized honoring the centuries-old tradition and practice of acequia irrigation. However, an undercurrent of dissatisfaction in the audience was felt in whispers, shaking heads, and complaints that the speech was “nonsensical,” “insulting,” and “intolerable.” One farmer who voiced opposition to the State Engineer’s commitment to include acequia usage in state water management particularly took issue with the pie chart of water usage throughout the state. According to the chart, agriculture accounted for 77% of water use. The farmer argued that it was wrong to categorize the small-scale flood irrigation employed by acequias as the same kind of water consumption as municipal or industrial use. Gravity-fed ditches, he argued, do not consume the water supply; they improve and replenish it by feeding the aquifer, while also nourishing riparian growth and wildlife. For this reason, while the State Engineer attempted to assure community ditch users of their equal *inclusion* in the state’s water economy, acequia users were in fact asserting their *exclusion* from that economy.

In the South Valley of Albuquerque, acequia users are among a large coalition of citizens attempting to contest the planning of a megadevelopment southwest of the city called Santolina. Backed by Barclay’s Bank, which foreclosed on the previous owners of the land, Santolina developers propose to build 38,000 homes for 100,000 people that will consume 12 million gallons of water a day. While the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority has claimed that they can provide that water, acequia users and neighborhood groups contest that

claim. As the director of the New Mexico Acequia Association, Paula Garcia, explained during public comment at a 2015 Bernalillo County Commission hearing on the development, rural and disadvantaged communities like those in the South Valley have historically been the first to lose their water to demand from more powerful interests. Consequently, acequia users and others argue that the development is based on “greed” rather than “need.” Though development proponents have characterized the local farmers and other protesters who have organized against them as “dramatic” and “anti-growth,” acequia users and others continue to argue for “smart growth,” including in-fill development and the use of local water to grow food for local people.

In both of these cases, acequia organizers are contesting the very template of democratic natural resource management that also promotes environmental health. Interestingly, the farmer’s claims in the first case about the environmental and hydrological benefits of gravity-fed ditch irrigation are only recently beginning to be clearly confirmed by ecological and hydrological research in the region. Similarly, opponents of the Santolina development point to studies about the negative impacts of sprawl on community health and wellbeing. These studies lend scientific credence to community ditch users’ long-held conviction that not all forms of water use fit within a capitalist logic of consumption. Instead, their perspectives call into question the wisdom of water management regimes that treat water as a commodity to be bought and sold separate from the land and life that it nourishes. As drought becomes an increasingly urgent problem across the Western United States, we must look for alternatives to the understandings of water that have conventionally driven its management. The place-based environmental and natural resource knowledge of community ditch users reflects water’s inseparability from the surrounding environment and the value of a holistic and context-specific approach to water management.

Policymakers in a position to influence water management need to make the effort to look for and incorporate perspectives on natural resource use that privilege community and environmental health rather than simple economic gain, especially when these perspectives come from traditionally disempowered communities whose voices are rarely heard in policy discourses. Concrete strategies to incorporate these voices should include: 1) Supporting legislation that encourages local, decentralized, and sustainable water management, such as water banks; 2) Promoting elected rather than appointed water boards to minimize the influence of powerful corporate interests; and 3) Soliciting the input of local communities in questions of development and water use through public fora. By employing these strategies, policymakers can not only increase democracy in natural resource management, they can also learn innovative ways to protect natural resources and the communities that depend on them.

Those who will benefit from research

This research seeks to foster productive knowledge exchange and cooperative relationships between the acequia community and water management policy-makers. Specifically, this research will contribute to the organizing efforts of the New Mexico Acequia Association. It will also potentially contribute to the efforts of the Center for Social Sustainable Systems in the South Valley of Albuquerque, particularly in their work to contest the Santolina development plan.

This research has also been used to compose a public policy brief for the Scholars Strategy Network, an organization of scholars across the United States who work to connect their research in accessible ways to public policy and the strengthening of democracy.

Publications

Public policy brief for the Scholars Strategy Network (SSN) – “Learning from Community Perspectives on Water Management in Times of Drought”

Article draft – “Bodies of Water: Power, Community, and Health in the *Contra Santolina* Movement”

Other students or faculty members who assisted on project

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