

# Water politics and cultural difference: Fostering community relationships to promote environmental health and community wellbeing in times of drought

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## Purpose of Study

This project focuses 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, especially in current conditions of drought.

## Study Underway

Qualitative methodologies will be employed at sites in the Española Valley of northern NM and Albuquerque's South Valley: 1) Participant observation will consist of attending, participating in, and observing a number of contexts, including private and community water-use practices, acequia organizations and meetings, and public events, such as legislative sessions, focusing on the ways that acequia users articulate ideas and concerns about natural resources, especially as they relate to health, family, community, culture, and economy; 2) Semi-structured open-ended interviews with a targeted sampling of acequia users and state officials, focusing on concepts of water, environmental health, and community wellbeing, and 3) Pláticas (a common Spanish term for discussion groups), organized with groups of between 3 and 10 acequia users around a loosely structured set of questions focusing on concepts of water, environmental health, and community wellbeing. Data from this study will be analyzed qualitatively using an iterative process of open and focused coding. First, data will be analyzed using open coding to locate central themes, narratives, and understandings relating to the central research questions. Then, focused coding will be used 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.

## Benefits

This research will show how ideas of water and its use, combined with concepts of cultural difference, function as central factors in water conflict and the politics of water management. Understanding these factors, allowed by qualitative research, is crucial for establishing scientific and democratic water management for a drought-threatened future. In addition to increasing understanding of water conflict in New Mexico, this research seeks to foster productive knowledge exchange and cooperative relationships with a community that is deeply committed to the long-term health of New Mexico's water. By doing so, this research can address problems of water supply and management in New Mexico today and for future generations.

*Elise Trott is completing her doctoral dissertation at the University of New Mexico. She received an MS in anthropology from UNM and a BA in anthropology from the University of Chicago. Elise received the 2013 New Mexico Acequia Association "Congreso de las Acequias" Award for Valuable Contributions to the Mayordomo Project.*

