

The Colorado River Basin Crisis

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The Colorado River Basin that provides water for over 40 million Americans is on the brink of collapse. The damage will be irreversible and affect all the United States. Many people are under the impression that the river will just fill again and it's the cycle of life. California's residents are persistent in that they require such a high amount of water to properly function. Some people even think it's just a dry year, and once the drought is over everything will be okay. It's easy to fall into these ideas and move on with your day. But the Colorado River Basin is in desperate need of intervention. Not only are the ecosystems being affected, the amount of drinkable water within the West is being depleted. This will directly impact the animals, environments, and humans that rely upon this river for survival. The over allocation of the Colorado river basins has been an ongoing problem for many years, and it's our job to fix it. The Colorado river basin is drying up and is in desperate need of action. The loss of flow has already begun to present itself in problems such as economic, ecological, and environmental changes. Bringing water to seven states and providing water for over 40 million people. While simultaneously providing irrigation to about 5.5 million acres of land, (Fountain, 2022) This river is vital for the survival of the western United States and Mexico.

The Colorado river basin is broken into an upper basin made up of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico. While the lower basin is made up of Arizona, Nevada and California. Most of the upper basin gets their water directly from the river. Meaning they are not as affected by the drought and weather pattern changes. Whereas the lower basin gets its water from Lake Powell and Lake Mead. Which are both reservoirs making the lower water levels in the river a much larger issue "Federal officials in June called for the seven states that rely on the Colorado River to come up with plans to drastically reduce annual water diversions by about 15% to 25%

regionwide.” James (2022). The over allocation of This river is seeing itself manifest in many ways that will plague the west soon. One of them being the lack of water necessary for our agricultural needs.

The lack of water in the Colorado river basin will affect the entire United States agricultural system. This river provides water for much of southern California, without it we would not have fresh fruit year-round. We will not have access to many vegetables or produce without paying a heavy price due to importing from outside the us. “The Imperial Valley churns out about two thirds of the vegetables eaten by Americans during the winter” (Philpott, 2015). We rely on this one Region for most of our produce and the crops required to sustain the cattle industry. Making it a vital point in the survival of American life during winter. They have some of the oldest senior water rights, meaning they get first claim to water in the basin. This may seem beneficial on the surface but will negatively impact many major cities and tribes in the basin in the near future. With a call to conserve 15% - 25% of the water we are currently using, something has got to be done. “The federal government is designating \$4 billion from the Inflation Reduction Act for drought mitigation work in the Colorado River basin.” Hager (2022). This will benefit the corporations but negatively impact the workers who would in turn be laid off. The Imperial Valley has all its water supplied from the Colorado River, making it an interest point for all of America. With such a large part of our agricultural supply on the brink of collapse, you can see why people are panicking. It's in our best interest to devise a plan to stabilize this river basin and secure our future in the west.

The entire water system is outdated and is not adjusted to our current world issues at all. When the 1922 Colorado River Compact was passed, climate change, water allocation, indigenous communities, and drought were not factored in. Not to mention the extremely

backward senior water rights system. That basically said whoever is established first would be guaranteed water no matter the conditions within the basin or time of year. It also stated that if you did not use 100% of your allocation, it would be taken away. This forced farmers to use more than necessary, putting us into the predicament we are in now. Of course, now we can see the repercussions in the form of farming alfalfa, one of the most water intensive crops in the most arid parts of the US. The Imperial Valley has some of the most insane senior water rights and consumes an ungodly amount of water. This is a perfect example of how outdated the water system is and how damaging it will continue to be.

In the early 1950's David Brower, then executive director of the Sierra Club, was able to stop the proposal to dam the Green River in Dinosaur National Monument. This dam was being built in order to provide water for all the surrounding communities during times of drought. Although beneficial for the time being it would go on to disrupt much of the natural life inhabiting this land. Unfortunately, they were not able to save Glen Canyon from the same fate and David would go on to say it was "America's most regretted environmental mistake" (Glen Canyon Institute, 2018). Before it was flooded and turned into Lake Powell, it was known as the Glen Canyon. "The biological heart of the Colorado River, with more than 79 species of plants, 189 species of birds, and 34 species of mammals; and a cultural treasure, with more than 3,000 ancient ruins" (Glen Canyon Institute, 2022). A very important and necessary part of the Colorado River Basin. A lifeline for many different animals, generations of humans, and plant species native to that area. Only now the remnants of the past are coming to the surface as the lake dries, exposing what Glen Canyon once was.

The Colorado River is the lifeline for many indigenous groups who have been majorly impacted by the drought. Although the river provides for 22 federally recognized indigenous

tribes, they are still fighting for a spot at the table when it comes to addressing their needs with the river. Looking back before white settlers arrived out west, the indigenous communities lived in harmony with the land. They were able to sustain life for hundreds of years without damage to the natural environment. In 1908 the Supreme Court established that Tribes have the rights to draw from the river. This was decided only after they filled the needs of the white settlers in the form of dams and reservoirs by the Bureau of Reclamation, founded in 1902. Drawing hundreds of thousands of gallons from the Colorado river. Jay Weiner, water counsel for the Tonto Apache Tribe said it best. “There are political incentives for non-Indian water users essentially to try to put obstacles in the way of tribal development because otherwise that water is coming out of someone’s bucket.” (Weiner. 2022). Even though indigenous communities account for almost $\frac{1}{4}$ of the Colorado river rights, they are still being taken advantage of. This perfectly exemplifies how colonialism is still very alive and can present itself in different situations even today. They deserve a spot at the table when it comes to talking about how we fix this problem going forward and prevent it from happening again. “Roughly 60% of the water the tribes legally possess has never been developed or integrated into the region’s hierarchy of water rights” (Smith, 2022). This is because they do not have the necessary technology to harvest all the water within their share. Now you can see how this is just another long-lasting effect of colonialism and colonization of the west that still affects indigenous people. Luckily six tribes from four different states have finally been invited to be a part of the legal discussions within the basin. Although there could be more, it's about damn time.

Climate change is another large contributor to the drying up of the Colorado river basin. Whether people want to believe it or not, global warming is having devastating effects on our environment. This can be seen in many different rivers having lower flow rates, lower reservoir

levels and even completely drying up. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reports, “The ten warmest years on record have all occurred since 2005, with seven of the ten have occurred since 2014.” Understanding our impact upon the climate can better equip us with the tools necessary for change. Even a river as large as the Mississippi is seeing lower water levels and this is having adverse effects on many industries. The Republican River which also starts in Colorado is drying up and affecting agriculture. This is an issue that will persist until we can accurately address the many issues presented within this paper. While climate change does have a part to play within this, there are also many other factors. Such as excess water demands, Altered weather patterns, intensive farming, deforestation, and even natural causes (NOAA, 2022). All these variables are having adverse effects on our river systems within the United States. We must work together to find fast and effective solutions that will be beneficial for everyone.

With all these repercussions from our previous generations' decisions. It can be overwhelming or feel like there is no way to solve these deep-rooted issues, but there are solutions. Reintroducing beavers into the river's ecosystem to create natural dams that benefit the entire population. Draining lake mead so less water is evaporating from the river and allowing natural flows to return. Getting rid of water dependent plants and grass within the major desert cities. Replacing them with plants native to the land and restoring ecosystems. Coming together to devise a plan that accounts for everyone and allows the basins ecosystem to thrive is achievable. We must push for representatives on a local scale to support the Colorado River Basin. Elect those who understand how dire this situation is and are willing to work toward a better future. This is a cause I'm very passionate about because Colorado is one of my most favorite states I've ever been to. I've seen and swam in the Colorado River and even spent hours laying in Mount Sopris's penny

hot springs next to the river. It holds such a unique beauty and is so captivating, making it impossible not to fall in love with the mountains and valleys. Luckily, we have a year to implement these changes so there is still time, But the clock will soon strike twelve. Leaving us with a shallow reminder of the past and a river of mistakes if something isn't done.

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