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Razing Arizona

Will drought destroy the Southwest?

By [Christopher Ketcham](#)

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It was a river of drought, low enough that we could walk alongside the rafts, our feet sinking into the silky bottom. We had put in near Moab, Utah, at the mouth of Meander Canyon, where the Colorado River turns sluggish after racing out of the Rocky Mountains. There would be no worry about rapids for the next forty miles, not until Cataract Canyon, a stretch of white water that has a penchant for flipping boats and killing boatmen. Occasionally our rafts caught on sandbars and spun like lily pads, and we had to rally around them in the water and push. Where the flow deepened to the waist, a big-toothed writer named Bill deBuys, of New Mexico, who was once a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for his book *River of Traps*, got out and

swam. All but one of our party — the trip leader, John Weisheit, a slope-shouldered, slow-talking Moab river runner who had given up alcohol — popped open cold beers and jumped into the water, escaping the August heat as our boats drifted.



— Colorado River, Canyonlands National Park. All photographs © *Danny Wilcox Frazier*

The water was warm as a bath and soft on the skin, and it shone lustrous red from a brief summer monsoon days earlier that had churned it with the clay of flash flood. The CEO of Denver Water, a lawyer named Jim Lochhead, fit and efficient though sometimes jittery, with a mocking sense of humor and a habit of gnawing his cuticles, sipped his beer and dunked his head. “I claim this river for Denver Water and the verdant Front Range,” he shouted. The general manager of the Colorado River Water Conservation District, a nuclear engineer named Eric Kuhn, who had the endearing habit of inserting the word “okay” into his sentences at random, recited water statistics: historic flow, current flow, and the level of flow at which the Southwest would have to radically change its relationship to the river. “The quest for certainty,” he said, “is what the whole fight for this river will be about, okay.”

DeBuys, floating on his back, thought that matters were quite certain, that human demand had fatally outstripped natural flow, that with climate change the situation could only worsen. He had recently published a book about climate change in the Southwest. It was called *A Great Aridness*. As currently configured, deBuys assured us, the Southwest was doomed. It was the fastest-growing region in America, and most of its people lived in ever-expanding cities dependent for their water on a single river’s tenuous supply. “You know the three commonest Western lies?” said deBuys. “This pickup is paid for. I won this buckle in a rodeo. There’s water for this project.”

For the past fourteen years, the Colorado River has been at its lowest level since the ninth century. In 2012, the hottest year on record in the contiguous United States, when 60 percent of the country suffered drought, wildfires of exceptional size and fury had swept across the forests of New Mexico and Colorado. DeBuys did not envy Kuhn and Lochhead. As members of the bureaucracy that managed water for the seven states of the Colorado River basin, they would have to address these new challenges amid the bickering of local governments, some of whose claims went back more than a hundred years.



— Meander Canyon above the confluence of the Colorado and Green Rivers

Before lunch, Weisheit, harrumphing that it was time to see some ruins that would inform the conversation, tied the rafts at a narrow beach lined with tamarisk trees. We gathered water bottles, soaked our shirts, cocked our hats, and hiked to a little granary once used to store maize, its sandstone blocks last mortared with river mud around 1250. Here, improbably, a civilization had once flourished. The Ancestral Puebloans, sometimes known as the Anasazi (Navajo for “enemy ancestors”), had thrived on the Colorado Plateau for hundreds of years prior to their society’s collapse circa 1300, when the desert heated up and the rain stopped falling. They left tiered cities, irrigation ditches, petroglyphs, and modest granaries such as the one before us. Drought had set an entire people adrift, in an exodus known to archaeologists as the Great Abandonment.

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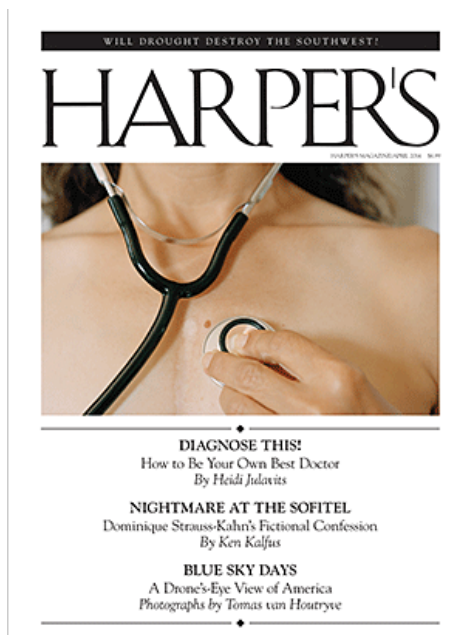
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