January 10, 2024

The Colorado River: Science, History, Literature, Policy

Instructor: Karl Flessa, Department of Geosciences. Contact: kflessa@arizona.edu

Class meets 2:00PM – 4:00 PM, Jan. 25, Feb. 1, Feb. 8, Feb. 15, and Feb. 22.

Rubel Room at the University of Arizona’s Poetry Center, 1508 E Helen St, Tucson, AZ

Syllabus and Reading List, as of January 9, 2024. Subject to change, especially Week 5 readings.

All readings or videos will be posted or linked.

Perhaps the best current and comprehensive review of conditions and issues (as of January 2023) is The Babbitt Center’s The Hardest-Working River in the West. This is a “story map” – so much more than a simple website. Read it/look at it. We’ll cover all the topics in the story map (and more), though maybe not in the same order.

You are not required to purchase any book. If you really want one book, the classic is Marc Reisner’s Cadillac Desert (1986). It is on the bookshelf of every water manager, water attorney, water scholar and water junkie in the western United States. It covers water in the western United States, not just the Colorado River. Cadillac Desert is thorough, well-written and out-of-date. Climate change, what climate change? One chapter is on your reading list, available via the course website.

Brave The Wild River (2023) tells the previously untold story of two women who mapped the botany of the Grand Canyon in 1938. Author Melissa Sevigny also provides commentary on the state of the Colorado River today. It’s a charming and instructive tale. An excerpt is on your reading list, available via the course website.

A pair of novels will get some attention in the course: Hippie anarchists battle development in Ed Abbey’s classic (1975) The Monkey Wrench Gang and Paolo Bacigalupi’s dystopian The Water Knife imagines Phoenix after the Central Arizona Project runs dry. Excerpts of each are on your reading list and, available via the course website.

All water-wonks in the West take a regular look at John Fleck’s website for updates, history, editorial comments and gossip about the Colorado and the Rio Grande.

A word about buying these and other books: For those in Tucson, try local first, used or new, at Bookman’s, The Book Stop, Mostly Books, Antigone’s or any bookstore wherever you are. If that fails, or if you can’t leave the house, there’s always you-know-who for instantaneous satisfaction via your Kindle or next-day satisfaction via their delivery truck.


1. Sign up for Google News Alert “Colorado River”
   https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/4815696?hl=en
2. Ten volunteers needed for Week 2: Five to read and discuss/report on The Monkey Wrench Gang; Five needed to discuss and report on The Water Knife.
6. What is groundwater? Northern California Public Media. (9 minutes)
10. Optional – Just for Fun. John Oliver’s rant on water in the West and the Colorado River in particular: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtxew5XUVbQ (25 minutes)


1. The Voices of Grand Canyon. Jim Enote (Zuni), Nikki Cooley (Navajo), Leigh Kuwanwisiwma (Hopí), Coleen Kaska, (Havasupai), and Loretta Jackson-Kelly (Hualapai) share what the Grand Canyon means to them and what they know in their hearts to be true. https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/b22a6a09bb2344ff845d9efd3e4152f7
7. Optional - Just For Fun: The Winning of Barbara Worth (1926). While building an irrigation system for California’s Imperial Valley, an engineer vies with a local cowboy for the affections of a rancher’s daughter. Gary Cooper’s first major role. Silent film that also depicts the Colorado River’s flooding and the creation of the Salton Sea in 1905. Special effects! (90 minutes) https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x245vt4


Week 4. February 15. Reclaiming the River: Adjudication and quantification of Native American water rights, David Brower’s revenge, endangered species, protecting the Grand Canyon, restoration beyond the border, Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell

Week 5. February 22. Where do we go from here?: Demand exceeds supply, climate change and aridification, prospects for augmentation, prospects for demand management, water-marketing, 2026 interim guidelines- who is at the table? Arizona groundwater reform?


