



River Notes: A Natural and Human History of the Colorado

Wade Davis

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Plugged by no fewer than twenty-five dams, the Colorado is the world's most regulated river drainage, providing most of the water supply of Las Vegas, Tucson, and San Diego, and much of the power and water of Los Angeles and Phoenix, cities that are home to more than 25 million people. If it ceased flowing, the water held in its reservoirs might hold out for three to four years, but after that it would be necessary to abandon most of southern California and Arizona, and much of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming. For the entire American Southwest the Colorado is indeed the river of life, which makes it all the more tragic and ironic that by the time it approaches its final destination, it has been reduced to a shadow upon the sand, its delta dry and deserted, its flow a toxic trickle seeping into the sea.

In this remarkable blend of history, science, and personal observation, acclaimed author Wade Davis tells the story of America's Nile, how it once flowed freely and how human intervention has left it near exhaustion, altering the water temperature, volume, local species, and shoreline of the river Theodore Roosevelt once urged us to "leave it as it is." Yet despite a century of human interference, Davis writes, the splendor of the Colorado lives on in the river's remaining wild rapids, quiet pools, and sweeping canyons. The story of the Colorado River is the human quest for progress and its inevitable if unintended effects—and an opportunity to learn from past mistakes and foster the rebirth of America's most iconic waterway.

A beautifully told story of historical adventure and natural beauty, *River Notes* is a fascinating journey down the river and through mankind's complicated and destructive relationship with one of its greatest natural resources.

River Notes: A Natural and Human History of the Colorado Details

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Bill Wells says

A very nice book of first-person accounts and history of the Colorado River. The integration between the two aspects of the book were successful and fascinating, but at the end it became very political. However, the points he makes are valid and important, and certainly worth considering.

Jeremy S says

I was shocked that I had not heard of Wade Davis before reading this book. For a man who has seen and done so much in his time, I find him a quiet victor, and to take an appropriate quote from his most recent book River Notes: “Men parsimonious with language but active in deed inspire confidence.”

Like the fourteen books that came prior, Davis' River Notes is chalk full of beautiful language, but it is the sheer act of writing this fantastic book that inspired me. Too often a poetic look at a subject is brushed off as art or a non-intellectual, but River Notes proves the opposite. Laced with just enough of the sharp edged facts to prove he knows what he is talking about (and dares you to challenge him), Davis is at once a historian, an ecologist, and (my favorite) a hearty traveler. His journey along the banks of the Colorado, through the Grand Canyon is as rich as his telling of the history of how all of this land came to be.

The book doesn't have a typical order, which allows it to flow in an almost majestic manner throughout the different issues Davis wishes to address. He inserts bits of history when it is pertinent to the story, not only in the standard introduction to the book. This makes it possible to move seamlessly through different areas of study and focal points—from the aboriginal people who roamed the shores of the Colorado long before American Settlers, to the trials and interesting histories of Brigham Young and his Mormon quest toward Salt Lake City as well as some of the first adventures of explorers down the Colorado, through the Grand Canyon.

While he is discussing these topics, he is constantly bringing us back to the adventure he is on at the tome of his writing—travelling, himself, down the Colorado. Spliced in with all of his wonderful anecdotes are histories and scientific data pertaining to the damming of the river, the consequences of the many actions taken, and some outlook on its future, should things remain the same.

Just past the half-way point of the book, Davis takes readers aside to tell us about something he remembers from his past: a time when speaking to a former professor and friend (David Brower), who in 1971 was “already a legend in the environmental community.” The interesting part of this anecdotal tangent was not when Davis was told by Brower that he could change the world—that anyone is capable of changing the world for that matter—but what he said after:

Always remember, he cautioned, that no environmental victory is final. Nothing is ever fully protected. Every battle won only reveals new frontiers of conflict, because the forces of greed and self-interest, as he put it, always reemerge.

How fitting that this conversation took place in 1971 and that we are confronted with this truth today. One need not look far to draw parallels between the greed driven plight of the Colorado through Davis' research—its dams, the creation of new, man-made lakes which do nothing but harm the ecosystem they say is being protected—and many of the environmental conflicts we see around us today. Many would put the British Columbia's Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline in this category, for example. As Davis points out, however, it is not a herculean task to solve many of these problems through analysing and questioning them critically.

As one can see, through the beautifully written *River Notes: A Natural and Human History of the Colorado*, Wade Davis has provided another powerful book that provokes and challenges readers, at a number of levels. To read about the history of the Colorado—how the aboriginals were wiped out, the people driven from their lands, the almost complete standstill that the river has come to compared to its former glory, and how much worse things are becoming—should be a message to all that there are some aspects of life left best untouched and untamed.

Bookmama50 says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. The author's descriptive writing made me feel as though I was right there on the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. It inspired me to yearn for a trip to the Grand Canyon as this book was an excellent prelude for such a journey. I found the history of this area very interesting and most enjoyable. It also brought out my environmental concerns of what humans have done to kill our wildernesses. It reminds me that we take nature, animals, land, and water for granted and don't always utilize them as we should. Aldo Leopold's quote "Man Always Kills the Thing He Loves" will haunt me forever. This book inspired me all the more to do whatever I can to preserve our natural resources. This is a book that one needs to read more than once and I surely will!

Amy (Other Amy) says

Don't you hate it when reviews start with "I really wanted to like this book..."? Well, I really wanted to like this book. I think if he had stuck to any ONE of the five or six things he tried to do with the book, it would have had a shot at brilliance. You want to write a polemic on western development focusing on water rights? OK. Hit me with your best arguments, fairly engage the other side(s), and marshal your arguments in something resembling a logical order when you come out swinging. You want to write a history? Great. Show me the story, again in some semblance of order (it does not have to be chronological, but it has to allow me to follow the thread). You want to tell me about your awesome rafting trip through the Grand Canyon while musing on the flora and fauna and the land itself? Do that! I will so read that book! You want to write a hagiography of various Native American tribes and conservationists? Um, not really with you there, but let's see what you can do. But when you cram all of these things together in one 176 page book, it's just not going to work, especially when you keep veering wildly from one to the other and back again. The writing is very enjoyable, but stay on topic, for crying out loud. (He excerpts his journal from his trip down the river one time, and based on that sample I will say that if the man ever publishes his travel journals, THAT will be a fantastic read, because he has led a remarkable life and is in fact a very fine writer.) There are other issues (his almost entirely uncritical embrace of Native American philosophy alongside his demonizing of the Mormons with only the briefest explanation, his immediate demonizing of the building of the Hoover and Glen Canyon dams and the formation of Lake Powell without really presenting the

background first, what sounds like an attack on the development at all of the western United States for present habitation UNTIL the last chapter when he finally addresses some argument as to what could be done in the present day, and the total ignoring of any mention of the history of the river above the Grand Canyon), but all of these could have been dealt with if he had just stopped jumping around so much.

Todd Martin says

Indeed the entire water crisis in the American West essentially comes down to cows eating alfalfa in a landscape where neither really belongs.

- Wade Davis

The subtitle of *River Notes* pretty much sums up this slim volume ... *A Natural and Human History of the Colorado*. Davis uses a raft trip down the Colorado River as a jumping off point to discuss the natural history and human history of the area, as well as threats to the region from dams, human development and invasive species.

The book is interesting and Davis has a nice writing style, but as someone with a higher than average interest and knowledge of Grand Canyon I didn't feel like I learned very much (other than the origin of the names for Badger and Soap canyons).

Julia says

Part memoir, but mostly history, and thoroughly readable. Davis uses his experience on a rafting trip down the Colorado River to talk about its history, both geologically and anthropologically. He dips into (no pun intended) the current ecological and water rights challenges facing the river, talks about John Wesley Powell's expedition(s), and introduces the reader to the wealth of Native American beliefs and guardianship of the river.

I knew little about the Colorado River and its canyons before reading this book, and found it informative as well as engaging. Very much recommended!

Lauren says

The fundamental dilemma in the [American] West is that we are living with nineteenth century laws and values, twentieth century infrastructure, and twenty-first century water needs.

Davis tries to do a lot of things in the slim volume - a history, a geology, a travelogue, an anthropology, and a political statement. While I enjoyed and learned from each of these facets, the narrative did not flow well... which is ironic considering the riverine subject matter.

Relying on narratives and descriptions from Powell, Stegner, and Abbey, Davis expounds more with his own observations on a raft trip down river. If you are unfamiliar with Davis' work, this isn't the best place to start. He's a great writer and storyteller, but you don't get that full effect here.

Matthew says

Mr. Davis provides a languid, somewhat rambling story of his own rafting trip through the Grand Canyon, during which he explores a number of views and topics covered extensively by several that have written before. There is much cross-over here between the historian, naturalist and adventurer (invoking John Wesley Powell's trip on the same river) and the concerned citizen (invoking McPhee's stories of David Brower, and Reisner's "Cadillac Desert"). Mr. Davis takes kindly to his river guide, a native Havasupai, and explains a little archaeology along the way as well. The geology of the Canyon is touched on at times, and I would have liked a cross-section plate near the front to accompany the provided river map and help keep the reader oriented in space and time during the rafting trip. Nevertheless, this is a casual read, something of a gentle introduction to the numerous historical, societal, scientific, engineering, and political issues around the lower Colorado River and the Grand Canyon. The reader whose interest is piqued by any given aspect of Mr. Davis' story will find plenty more in that vein by previous writers, from the prehistorical through the native tribes, through the controversy of Glen Canyon Dam, and to the present political and climatological issues on the River.

Joanna says

Excellent subject matter, but please, for the love of god: get an editor.

Kathy says

An excellent short book, beautifully written by ethnobotanist and anthropolgy professor Wade Davis. I'm now completely fascinated with the geology of the Grand Canyon and the fabled beauty of the Colorado River and its landscapes, which Davis captures in vivid, lucent prose that doesn't require any scientific background. The book also stands as a prescient and clearly presented survey of water politics in the Southwest and the long term effects of climate change, which wasn't nearly as much on the national radar when this book was written. The book is loosely organized around a 2 week raft trip that Davis took, and I especially enjoyed his observations about the people in the Park Service who serve as guides, experts who have an almost supernatural ability to "read" the river in all its variations. The narrative also includes wonderful observations about the Anasazi ("the old ones") who first lived near the river and their modern day Native American counterparts. I now have a Grand Canyon river trip on my bucket list, but I'll be portaging around some of those wicked rapids.

Ray Ziemer says

River Notes by Wade Davis is an enjoyable and informative "natural and human history of the Colorado." It was a nice birthday present which I think my son Thomas picked it up for me at Back of Beyond Books in Moab, UT. (It's not the sort of thing you'd find at Barnes & Noble in Naperville.) Davis, whose articles have appeared in National Geographic and Scientific American, has a talent for making natural history interesting. I credit him for making even the geology notable, although the Colorado's rocks are inherently more

interesting than most.

But Davis also brings human characters into the drama of the Colorado River – naturalists such as Aldo Leopold who explored the unique wetlands at the mouth of the river, and many of the visitors, conquerors, and natives of the land. Readers see the river from the viewpoint of Coronado, the explorer John Wesley Powell, and present-day Havasupai. At the heart of Davis's description is his own rafting journey through the Grand Canyon. Quotes from Powell, photographer Eliot Porter, and Author Edward Abbey, among others, spice up the mix.

It's a sensitive, but not sentimental look at the great river and the land around it -- a smart, concise collection of "River Notes" about the past, the present and the future. I recommend it to anyone with a love of the country. Those familiar with the West will see it in new light, and for all others, it's a great introduction.

R.Z. says

Written in the lyrical style of literary fiction, this is not fiction at all, but the story of Colorado River. It is captivating in the well-chosen words that describe the beauty of this river sometimes told through the words of the explorers who first followed it from its origin and into Mexico. We learn about the tectonic plates that helped to form it and about the Mormons who began to change it. Later the dams reduced its flow so that it is but a shadow of itself, yet utterly vital to the existence of cities of the American Southwest. Every person who cares about water sources and about the environment in general should read this book.

David Harris says

I read this book concurrently with George Handley's *_Home Waters_*, a book about a less famous river, the Provo, which passes through my home town of the same name toward the end of its 70 mile journey from the high Uintahs in eastern Utah to Utah Lake.

One interesting similarity between the two books was their differing perspectives on a common topic, Mormonism. Davis was very critical of Mormonism but also of the other groups responsible for irrigating the West. The book contains lots of interesting information about the Havasupai, the Hopi and other indigenous peoples whose worlds and ways of life are dependent on the river.

River Notes is part history and part travelogue, and in it he makes an appeal to re-think how we apportion and value water here in the West. Noting that John Wesley Powell already understood full well back in his day that there would never be enough water to turn the desert into farms, he points out that we still haven't learned that lesson in our own day. If cattle ranchers had to pay for their water at the same rate that people living in San Diego pay for their residential water usage, he writes, the resulting price of beef would be impossible to sustain for any length of time.

Thomas says

"There can surely be no greater crime against nature than to cause the death of a river, and no greater gesture of restitution than to facilitate its regeneration."

- Wade Davis, *River Notes*, p 73.

Wade Davis is Explorer-in-Residence at the National Geographic Society and author of numerous best-selling books, notably *The Serpent and the Rainbow* and *Into the Silence*. I stumbled upon *River Notes* quite by accident in Barnes & Noble and immediately bought it. Sometimes the best books are the ones that don't get much national exposure. So it is with *River Notes*. This short but fine book is published by Island Press, a non-profit whose stated goal is "To reach targeted audiences...who can and will take action to protect the plants and animals that enrich our world, the ecosystems we need to survive, the water we drink, and the air we breathe." Being familiar with Davis' work, I find myself purchasing his books without hesitation and I am never sorry that I did. *River Notes* is a long essay that blends history, science and observation into a compelling study of one of America's greatest natural resources. There are a few maps but no photographs, and as such that makes the prose all the more important. Wade Davis never disappoints. His writing is intelligent, often beautifully descriptive and imminently insightful. Also recommended: *Grand Canyon: A River at Risk*, text by Wade Davis with photographs by Chris Rainier.

Agilborder says

Excellent!
