

Review: Dead Pool: Lake Powell, Global Warming, and the Future of the West
By James Lawrence Powell

Reviewed by David Jenkins
Roundhouse Institute for Field Studies, USA

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The history of Lake Powell is a history of failure, near failure, and, at best, limited and short-term success. The near failure, with which James Powell begins his book, was the potential collapse of Glen Canyon Dam in 1983. An overfull reservoir required the use of two spillway tunnels carved through the sandstone adjacent to the dam. The massive release of water caused the spillways to begin to fail, potentially eroding the soft sandstone and undermining the integrity of the dam. If the dam failed, the result would be a cascading disaster, as dams below Lake Powell collapsed in turn under the onslaught of a massive flood. Runoff, however, slowed to manageable levels at the end of the summer.

This averted catastrophe serves as a potent point of departure for James Powell's description of the many failures which led to the construction of Glen Canyon Dam. These include Congress's failure to heed the advice of John Wesley Powell in the late nineteenth century concerning the West's limited capacity for irrigation; the early twentieth-century failure to enforce the provisions of the 1902 Newlands Act, which provided funds for irrigation works to be repaid by farmers who bought irrigable public lands; the governmental failure to estimate with precision the costs and benefits of huge water projects; the failure to accurately measure Colorado River flows, in order to make useful predictions about future water apportionment; the famous inability of squabbling states to rationally divvy-up Colorado River water, resulting in protracted litigation that continues to this day; the failure of nascent environmental groups at mid-century to foresee the ecological effects of filling Glen Canyon; the ridiculous, internecine skirmishes between the National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation about potential dam sites; and the overarching failure of local, state and federal governments to understand that population growth in the West must be limited, or, to put it differently, that such growth must be commensurate with the limitations imposed by the environment. The list could go on.

Fortunately, James Powell writes with such clarity, verve and attention to detail that even the arcane infighting of bureaucrats becomes interesting, in large measure because Powell keeps the reality of the Colorado River system at the forefront of his narrative. Fortunately, too, *Dead Pool* is not simply about Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell. It is also about how nature and culture have become intertwined in ways that make them difficult to tease apart, with the Colorado River system as a striking example, and global warming as a looming threat.

Rising temperatures mean, among other things, reduced runoff for the Colorado River, perhaps by as much as 20 percent by 2050. The political problem is that states in the Upper Basin of the Colorado River drainage are obligated to release 8.23 million acre feet of water each year to the Lower Basin states through Glen Canyon Dam. But, if Lake Powell cannot continue to be filled, it will have to be drained to meet that obligation. As the lake lowers it eventually reaches the level of the dam's lowest outlet—the level which provides the title for Powell's book.

Dead Pool is also about successes, although these are clearly limited in scope and, ultimately, flawed: engineering success in the form of an impressive dam built in a difficult environment; political success in the form of outmaneuvering one's opponents, in order to provide the funding and the bureaucratic

rationale for Lake Powell; and social success in the form of unprecedented population growth in arid western cities such as Phoenix and Las Vegas.

In 1983 the problem was too much water. In the early twenty-first century the problem is too little water, with sustained drought a prominent concern for cities and farmers alike. As Powell emphasizes, “hydraulic societies have always deluded themselves into believing they could gamble with Nature and win.” In the long term, the gamble will fail. The question that remains is not whether but when Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell will succumb to the natural law of the river. With 37,000 acre-feet of silt settling onto the floor of Lake Powell each year, the reservoir will eventually fill with enough mud to render Glen Canyon Dam useless—not for seven hundred years, in Reclamation’s estimate; in as few as fifty-one years, in one worst-case scenario. Unfortunately, global warming and reduced runoff accelerate the process.

James Powell provides a timely and useful overview of the Colorado River and the future of the southwest, which will be of interest to the specialist, the general reader, and—one hopes!—policymakers. In the late nineteenth century, books about the West were often placed on the desk of every Congressman, a form of boosterism, but also an attempt to provide policymakers with accurate information about a misunderstood region. It may be time to revive the practice. *Dead Pool* would be a good book with which to start.

David Jenkins <dvdjenkins@hotmail.com>, Roundhouse Institute for Field Studies, 32 Magean St., Brunswick, Maine 04011, TEL: (207) 713-7079.