

Book Review

David M. Freeman 2011. *Implementing the Endangered Species Act in the Platte Basin Water Commons*. Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado.

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David M. Freeman's *Implementing the Endangered Species Act in the Platte Basin Water Commons* is a landmark study in how self-interested governments and stakeholders can work toward correcting a tragedy of the commons in a large-scale, multi-jurisdictional, and economically developed setting. It is a book that deserves to be widely read and thoroughly studied, though its unassuming title may not immediately suggest this.

The Platte Basin is located in the west-central US and is shared by the states of Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska. For much of the 20th century, there was a race to appropriate the basin's water resources for economic uses, most often with considerable federal assistance and planning from the US Bureau of Reclamation (USBR). Fifteen major dams and reservoirs were constructed in the Platte Basin to control and manage water distribution, and the waters of the Platte became some of the most intensively used in the world, much of it for agricultural irrigation. Irrigation still remains the basin's biggest water use (the Platte supports over 2 million acres of irrigated land), but other water uses, particularly urban, industrial, recreational, and ecological uses, have emerged to compete for the basin's scarce water and to challenge the irrigators' dominance.

By the 1970s, intensive development and over-appropriation had taken their toll on the Platte: downstream flows were significantly reduced and the basin's natural flow regime was radically altered, impairing riverine environments and threatening native species. In 1973, the US Congress passed the *Endangered Species Act* empowering the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to protect listed species judged by the agency to be in jeopardy. Beginning in 1978, six such species were identified in the Platte and the USFWS asserted that 417,000 acre-feet of water – a massive amount in an already over-appropriated basin – should

be returned to the environment in order to protect critical habitat for the species in jeopardy. This book documents how the USFWS worked in conjunction with other federal agencies, state agencies, and a plethora of stakeholders in the effort to return water to the environment and protect critical habitat.

In doing so, Freeman uses a qualitative methodology that is distinctive from most other studies of large-scale, multi-jurisdictional commons. Rather than attempting to reconstruct the intergovernmental and stakeholder negotiations through backward-looking process tracing, as is done in most studies, Freeman had the foresight to recognize the significance of what was happening in the Platte Basin and to attend the stakeholder meetings himself as an impartial observer. This gives the study a degree of credibility that most others cannot hope to attain. Freeman's observations – amassed over nearly a decade – are combined with extensive subject interviews and archival research to produce an intricate and meticulous account in the best traditions of qualitative sociological research. Readers are deeply immersed in the Platte Basin case and become intimately familiar with the complex and interconnected webs of interests involved in the negotiations. At some points, these details threaten to overwhelm the reader and some perseverance is required; but, it is well worth the effort.

The book makes an important theoretical contribution to commons scholarship without being over-burdened by theory. It focuses on the production of a collective good (habitat restoration) rather than the governance of a common pool resource (the waters of Platte basin) as a whole. Nevertheless, it explores one of basic theoretical questions underpinning most commons research: "...how do individual actors transcend the prisoners' dilemma dynamic to solve a problem requiring joint collaborative construction of a collective good to address a tragedy of the commons?" (p. 431).

Exploring this question in a large-scale, multi-jurisdictional, and economically developed setting makes this book both ambitious and special. The existing body of common pool theory has been heavily influenced by studies undertaken in settings that are small-scale, that involve only a single sovereign jurisdiction, and that are situated in economically developing countries. Studies of commons problems in large-scale and multi-jurisdictional common pools in developed countries have been relatively few and have had relatively less influence on common pool theory. *Implementing the Endangered Species Act in the Platte Basin Water Commons* takes a small but important step in correcting this imbalance, particularly chapter 31 which proposes five pre-conditions and seven variables that were instrumental to the eventual success of stakeholder collaboration in the Platte Basin. While Freeman is appropriately modest about the explanatory power and generalizability of the findings from his case study, they do provide something of a baseline for future scholarship in this area.