Contents

Preface, ix
Contributors, xi

Part One

Western Water Made Simple

1 The West's Water-crats and Dam-icans
   Ed Marston
2 The Corps Adapts, the Bureau Founders
   Lawrence Mosher
3 Selling Water, or Selling Out?
   Bob Gottlieb/Peter Wiley
4 When Water Kingdoms Clash
   Ed Marston
5 Shrink to Fit
   Douglas Towne

Part Two

The Columbia River: An Age of Reform

6 The Stuff of Moral Tales
   Ed Marston
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>A Great Loneliness of the Spirit</td>
<td>Charles F. Wilkinson/Daniel Keith Conner</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Dammed Columbia</td>
<td>Chuck Williams</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Salmon: Continuity for a Culture</td>
<td>Cynthia D. Stowell</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>A Working Relationship</td>
<td>Chuck Williams</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The View from the Upper Basin</td>
<td>Pat Ford</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The Chainsaw Massacre</td>
<td>Hadley Roberts</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Showing the West the Way</td>
<td>Verne Huser</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part Three**

**The Missouri River: In Search of Destiny**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The Missouri River: Developed, but for What?</td>
<td>Ed Marston</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>There Are No Boring Landscapes</td>
<td>Peter Carrels</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>&quot;The Most Useless River There Is&quot;</td>
<td>Peter Carrels</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>How Could Anyone Oppose, or Favor, the Garrison Project?</td>
<td>Ed Marston</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The Real Water Lawyers</td>
<td>Marjane Ambler</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>A Tale of Two Irrigation Districts</td>
<td>Marjane Ambler</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>They Built Better than They Knew</td>
<td>Ed Marston</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>With Reckless Impetuosity</td>
<td>Rose Houk</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Sharing Water with the Colossus of the North</td>
<td>Jose Trava</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>The Bureau's Rube Goldberg Machines</td>
<td>Paul Krza</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>What Size Shoe Does an Acre-Foot Wear?</td>
<td>Ed Quillen</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Night Watch</td>
<td>C. L. Rawlins</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Reworking the Colorado River Basin</td>
<td>Ed Marston</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>The Snow Also Rises</td>
<td>Allen Best</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Selected Reading List: 217
Index: 221
Also Available from Island Press: 233
Salmon! Venison! Roots! Berries! The old man rings a hand bell and calls out the Indian name for each food. The people, seated at tule mats on the floor of the longhouse, sample tiny portions of the sacred foods from their plates. When the old man calls “choosh!” everyone drinks a swallow of water and reaches family-style for the many platters of native and modern food. The feast ends with a prayer and another “choosh.”

Every ceremonial feast on the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon begins with salmon and ends with water. For the people, and for their ancestors along the Columbia River, salmon has long been the most treasured of foods, and water the purest. Together, they represent the constancy and the bounty of N’chi Wana, the great river that shaped the culture of the Columbia Plateau people (see map on pages 48–49).

The Warm Springs people now have to travel 100 miles to celebrate the arrival of the salmon at their traditional fishing grounds. But salmon is still at the heart of reservation rituals, from feasts honoring the roots, huckleberries and wild celery, to funerals, weddings, name-givings, memorial dinners, and important political meetings. And while history has driven a wedge between the river people and their
ancestral home, the river still flows through their lives in significant ways.

For about 11,000 years before Lewis and Clark paddled down the Columbia River in 1805, native peoples lived continuously along its banks. Around the time of contact, the people of the middle Columbia—Sahaptin-speakers above the present city of The Dalles and the Chinookan-speaking Wascos and Wishrams downriver—lived in small villages of five to 10 families (see map). The Sahaptins and Wasco/Wishrams, though different in language and cultural emphasis, were bound together by their "Plateau" lifestyle, dictated by the rushing river and the semi-arid land around it. They lived in relative peace and prosperity.

Each spring, the lives of both peoples centered on the chinook salmon that were migrating upstream toward their spawning grounds. Standing on rocks over narrow river channels, fishermen aimed their spears, set traps or swept the current with long-poled nets, capturing scores of the silvery fish with the valued pink meat. On shore, the women butchered and filleted the fish, barbecuing some of it right away but hanging most of it to dry in the warm breezes. Sheaves of dried salmon were bundled up and stored away for winter use or for trade.

In the summer it was steelhead or other varieties of salmon, in the fall another run of chinook. The river also supplied plenty of sturgeon,
lampreys, suckers, and smelt, as well as some shellfish. For six months out of the year, the Columbia demanded ceaseless toil from the people it fed, but the river people were paid over and over for their efforts. As long as the fishermen demonstrated the proper respect for the spirits of the river and of the salmon, they believed there would always be enough to eat.

The Sahaptins and Wasco/Wishrams did not just subsist on the river harvest. Salmon was their material wealth and they were skilled at marketing it. In fact, the mid-Columbia was the center of a vast trade network stretching from the Pacific coast to the Rocky Mountains. During huge summer gatherings, the fishermen traded their salmon for such desirables as animal skins, dried meat and vegetables, basketry, bows and arrows, decorative shells, and even slaves. Because of the steady stream of visitors, the people of the Columbia tended to be cosmopolitan, accustomed to change and new ideas.

The white newcomers proved to be more change than the people could accommodate. Settlers, too, knew the importance of the Columbia, and in a mere 50 years had cleared the riverbanks of virtually all native inhabitants. The river people to some extent weathered the Christianizing and civilizing pressures from white settlements at The Dalles and Walla Walla, the installation of "fish wheels" at their ancient sites, and the introduction of disease and alcohol. But when officials came to them in 1855 with pieces of paper that described new homes away from the Columbia, they recognized that life as they had known it for centuries was ending.

The four treaties made with the plateau tribes in June of 1855 contained much the same wording and intent. They ceded ancestral lands and reserved land far from the river at the Warm Springs and Umatilla reservations to the south, the Yakima Reservation to the north, and the Nez Perce Reservation in Idaho. Payment for the land was in the form of farm tools and supplies, reservation blacksmith shops and mills, food rations and salaries for government personnel. The displaced people were supposed to take up an agrarian life and stay out of the white settlers' hair.

Partly as a selling point, the treaties also included a few simple words reserving a right that the tribes exercise today—much to the chagrin of many a non-Indian: "The right of taking fish at all usual and accustomed stations, in common with citizens of the United States."

In the early years of the reservations, many families lived dual lives, camping and fishing on the Columbia in the summer when school let out, and wintering on the reservations. This practice was continually discouraged by federal government personnel, who insisted that the future of the tribes lay in education, entrepreneurism,
private land ownership, and a new diet. But the superintendents could not guarantee that crops would survive the short growing season and marginal soil, or that tools and rations would arrive from the East on schedule. The people often went hungry awaiting the benefits of civilization.

Halfway into the 20th century, the Columbia was still an important source of food for the reservations, despite inroads into the supply of salmon and the changing pattern of life on the reservations. An overly enthusiastic non-Indian commercial fishery, particularly in the ocean, and the construction of dams on the main stem, were hastening a day the river people thought would never come, when the salmon would swim less plentifully into their nets. Still, the fishery at Celilo Falls endured in a manner little changed over the centuries.

Then, abruptly, it ended. In 1956, The Dalles Dam halted the cascading water, and the ancient fishing and camping sites were covered by still water. The people held what they thought would be their last salmon feast.

Arguing with the Army Corps of Engineers had been futile. The citizens of the Northwest wanted electricity, irrigation, and flood control, and the loss of a few fish and a picturesque Indian fishery was a small price to pay. The tribes took the monetary compensation ($15 million for the Yakima, $4 million each for the Warm Springs and Umatilla, and $2.8 million for the Nez Perce), knowing full well that their loss couldn’t be translated into cash.

It was a difficult time for the tribal councils, which were accused by their fishermen constituents of selling them out. Three tribes decided to distribute the cash settlements to individual tribal members. But the Warm Springs council decided to keep the sum intact for future reservation development. It proved a wise decision.

The loss of the Celilo fishery had a note of finality about it, perhaps even more than the treaty-signing 100 years before. A door slammed on the past and the tribes were forced to consider a whole new future. By the 1950s, they were somewhat better equipped to face new options. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 had returned some political power and autonomy to Indian tribes nationwide, although days of readily available federal loans and grants for economic development were still 20 years away.

Those fishermen who saw no future on the reservations put aside their dipnets, bought gillnets and motorboats, and became commercial fishermen like the lower river non-Indians. They launched their boats into the main-stem Columbia from the various “in-lieu sites” that had been reserved by the government as dams gobbled up their fishing grounds. A number of families, particularly from among the Yakima tribe, made a modest-to-profitable living from the river.
A handful of Warm Springs fishermen chose this path, but their tribal council went in a very different direction. Depositing the Celilo settlement in the bank, they thought long and hard about what their reservation land and resources had to offer. Taking $100,000 from their savings, they hired a group at Oregon State College (now Oregon State University) to advise them on the reservation’s natural potentials. The five-volume results of the 1960 OSU study, which are still used in planning today, pointed to the reservation’s 300,000 acres of merchantable timber and the natural beauty of the land as possible sources of income.

Taking another $165,000 from their bank account, the tribal council bought back a piece of prime real estate along the Warm Springs River, where a non-Indian doctor had developed a spa featuring the hot mineral waters that bubbled out of the ground. That was the beginning of Kah-Nee-Ta Vacation Resort, a tribal enterprise that now includes a 144-room hotel, golf course, tennis courts, tipi village, cottages, and Olympic-size pool.

The people of Warm Springs, always a hospitable sort, nevertheless have felt ambivalent about encouraging tourism on their reservation. Without the full support of the community, Kah-Nee-Ta has not lived up to its profit-making potential, but continues to be a kind of showpiece to the non-Indian world. Instead of tourism, the real energy of the Warm Springs Confederated Tribes has gone into their wood-products business.

It began in 1967, when the tribes took out a loan to purchase the sawmill built at Warm Springs by non-Indians years before. As owner of both the raw material and the processing plant, the tribes could begin to map out a future that would guarantee jobs and a dependable supply of timber. Besides the 300 mill employees, the timber industry has created dozens of entrepreneurial opportunities in the reservation forest. In fact, many of those who might have been fishermen 35 years ago now find challenge and satisfaction working in the tall stands of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir.

Warm Springs has also capitalized on the rivers within and along its boundaries. Contracts negotiated with Portland General Electric in the 1950s and 1960s have resulted in substantial rental income from two dams on the Deschutes River. Quietly inserted in the Pelton Dam contract was a clause enabling the tribes to one day develop a hydroelectric plant at the Pelton re-regulating dam. Today, Warm Springs Power Enterprises produces electricity that it sells to private utilities at a profit.

Gone are the days when the people shuttled back and forth between the seasonal bounty of the Columbia River and a questionable existence on the reservation. But as the standard of living at
The White Man Wanted Bright Lights, the Indian Money

She grew up along the Columbia River, where her family had dozens of scaffolds at the Celilo fishing grounds. When she wasn’t attending Catholic boarding school in The Dalles, young Ellen was with her people among the rocks and the rapids, learning from the men how to handle the huge nets and watching the women deftly butchering the catch.

“It was unusual for girls to fish,” she said, “but I learned to dip the minute I was strong enough to hold the dip net.” Butchering was definitely off-limits to children. “They didn’t want our childish hands on the fish. We could practice on jacks and steelhead, but we couldn’t hang them up with the women’s salmon.”

From her elders, Ellen learned the rhythms of the river and her culture. There were times to fish and times to leave the nets idle, times to offer prayers and times to be silent, times to work hard and times to celebrate. From her mother, Ellen also learned the commercial end of fishing. While her father dreamed of finding gold and getting rich, her mother teamed up with a white man to operate a fish wheel, which scoops fish from the river into a chute. Taking the money she earned, she traveled by steamboat to Portland to buy enough supplies for a year. But the family’s caches of dried salmon were their real wealth; they ate from their supplies through the winter or traded them to Indians from as far away as Montana for buckskin and meat.

Ellen was prepared to live out her adult life following the salmon runs of the Columbia, until history took a different turn.

The Dalles Dam eliminated the Celilo fishery as Ellen had known it. “The white man wanted brighter lights in his home and the Indians wanted money,” she says. “That’s the only reason that dam is there.” Fortunately, her family has also fished actively along one of the Columbia River tributaries, at Sherar’s Falls on the Deschutes River.

Warm Springs has improved, the people and their leaders have not forgotten the sacrifice that made it possible. Neither has Warm Springs put the Columbia River behind it as so much history and sentiment.

Warm Springs and the other treaty tribes still speak of the importance of the Columbia River to their survival. And they continue to negotiate doggedly for their place on the river, for rights that at times have seemed meaningless in the face of dwindling salmon runs.

In fact, Warm Springs has been a leader in resolving conflict on the Columbia among Indian, non-Indian, sports, and commercial fisheries. Excellent legal representation by Warm Springs attorneys
helped bring about the landmark decision by U.S. District Court Judge Robert Belloni in *U.S. v. Oregon*. Belloni ruled in 1969 that the treaty tribes were “entitled to a fair share of the fish produced by the Columbia River system” and that the state could only regulate the Indian fishery for conservation purposes. The Belloni decision provided the foundation for a second landmark decision in *U.S. v. Washington* in 1974, when federal Judge George Boldt ruled that the treaties’ “fishing in common” language should be interpreted as the right of Indians to catch up to 50 percent of the state’s off-reservation catch.

While these decisions did much to cool the angry confronta-
An Indian Leader Puts His Faith in the Private Sector

The Wascos were once the most influential people along the Columbia River. Skilled fishermen and traders, the Wascos knew wealth and power because of the chinook salmon that seasonally swam upstream into their nets and traps. On the Warm Springs Reservation in Central Oregon, the Wascos who descend from these river entrepreneurs have taken leadership roles in tribal business and government. One leader is Kenneth Smith, who was the Confederated Tribes’ general manager for 12 years and then took his expertise to Washington, D.C., as Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs from 1981 to 1985.

He was raised by his grandparents on a reservation ranch, far from the Columbia River. Although the family journeyed to the river each September to meet the migrating fall chinook, their livelihood depended on the cattle back home. Smith grew up knowing the meaning of a hard day’s work but his grandparents also taught him more than that. Uneducated themselves, they believed that education was the key to their people’s future, and they pressed Ken to continue his schooling.

Smith’s degree in accounting landed him a job in tribal administration where he was soon being groomed for management. By the time he was appointed general manager in 1969, tribal business was booming. Kah-Nee-Ta Resort had been launched, the sawmill was operating in the black, job opportunities had mushroomed and the reservation’s standard of living was rising visibly. Smith guided the tribal corporation through the halcyon ’70s.

By the time he was tapped by the Reagan administration, Smith was known for his commitment to tribal self-sufficiency through economic

tions—both on the river and in the courtrooms—that characterized the 1960s and 1970s, the treaty tribes still find themselves on the defensive. They are not a voting part of the Columbia River Compact, which sets commercial fishing seasons for Oregon and Washington. As a result, the Columbia River Inter-tribal Fish Commission, or CRITFC, established in 1977 to represent the treaty tribes, often challenges the Compact’s decisions in court. At the same time, some fishermen with little patience for the slow workings of the judicial system continue to fight their battles right on the river.

In 1982, 19 Indian fishermen were charged with selling fish out of season to undercover federal and state agents. In the course of “salmon scam,” nine fishermen were convicted in U.S. District Court and sentenced for up to five years in federal prison. Warm Springs quietly let its one convicted member report to prison in the summer of 1986,
development. “To be really self-governing,” he said while carrying out his D.C. duties, “tribes can’t have their strings pulled by the federal government. I have to push and challenge them to realize that it’s not the government’s money they need. It’s help in strengthening the capabilities of Indian governments.”

Still, when Smith began trimming the Bureau of Indian Affairs budget, merging area offices and eliminating some Indian schools, even his supporters at Warm Springs were skeptical. “I think I had some of the councilmen scratching their heads a little bit when I was saying we had to rely more on the private sector for our financing,” he said.

Smith has since joined the private sector himself, working as an economic-development consultant to Indian tribes, including his own.

—Cynthia D. Stowell

but on the day the sentences were to begin, the Yakima tribe challenged the federal convictions by pressing its own charges against five of its fishermen and keeping three of them in tribal custody for a time. Tribal charges were eventually dropped but Yakima support for its fishermen was clear.

The two tribes have different ways of asserting their treaty rights. Warm Springs likes to negotiate and forge compromises; Yakima is driven by moral arguments that often supersede legalities. The tribes are united, however, in their insistence that the Columbia River is essential to their—and the region’s—well-being. The fishing tribes on the Columbia say they are not just user-groups out to get what they can from the river.

As aboriginal stewards of the salmon and the water of the Columbia, the treaty tribes say they have a privilege and a responsibility to
see that these resources are used properly. They want to participate fully in planning and development along the Columbia, not just to assert treaty rights or to exercise their sovereign powers alongside the states, but also to ensure that the salmon survives.

"Salmon Scam" aside, there has been an unprecedented degree of cooperation among various river-users. Record low salmon and steelhead returns forced the parties to bring about regional solutions, such as the U.S.-Canada Pacific Salmon Intervention Treaty (1985) and mitigation efforts under the Northwest Regional Power Planning Act. This spirit of cooperation has been rewarded with improved returns of steelhead and salmon.
Index

Acre-foot, defined, 190–191
Agriculture, Department of. See Department of Agriculture
Ak-Chin reservation, fight for water, 152
Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland, 191
All-American Canal, 177, 179, 199
Allocation:
  of Columbia fish, 84, 91–92
  of water from Wind River, described, 141, 144–146
Ambler, Marjane, 117, 140, 147
Andrade, Don Guillermo, 172, 174
Andrade Concession, 174
Andrews, Mark, 138
Anemone, 121
Animas-LaPlata Project, 5
cost, 10
cost-sharing, 23, 26
fight against, 201
Apples, as new crop for Arizona, 45
Arapahoe, fights for water and land, 149, 150–151
Arid Land Studies, Office of. See Office of Air Land Studies
Arizona v. California, 13
Arizona, southeast, agricultural problems and some solutions, 42–45
Arkansas River, 192
Army Corps of Engineers, 53, 68, 69, 74, 77, 92, 113, 114, 130, 135, 137, 150, 158
budget and manpower, 1977–1986, 23
budget shrink, 16
possible merge with Bureau of Reclamation, 19–20
present state, 19
strategy for survival, 16–17, 21–22
Ashley, James, 125
Aspinall, Wayne, 7, 9, 163
Audubon Society. See National Audubon Society
Augmentation, defined, 191
Aurora, 163, 192
Badlands, 124
Baird’s sparrow, 120
Balcomb, Scott, 214, 215
Bastos, Dos de, 172
Battlement Mesa, 167
Belle Fourche:
  Dam, 134
  River, reservoir on, 129
Belloni, Robert, 77
Belloni decision, 81–82
Beneficial use, defined, 191
Ben Franklin Dam, 68
Berle, Peter, 133
Berry, Doyle G., 31–32
Berthoud Pass, 166
Best, Allen, 211
Best management practices, 99
Big Bend, 66
  Dam, 150
The Big Drops, 167
Big Muddy, 112
Big Sandy:
  Project, 14
  River, 182, 184
Bison, 122
Bitterroot National Forest, clearcutting and overcutting, 206
Black Hills, 124
Black Mesa, 206
Blackwelder, Brent, 17, 22, 25
Blue Mesa:
  Dam, 199, 209
  Reservoir, 161, 210
Blue River, 167
Blumm, Michael, 64
Boldt, George, 77
Boldt decision, 81–82
Bonneville Dam, 68, 83, 84, 93
  locks at, 69–70
Bonneville Power Administration:
  in fishery disputes, 92
  and Intertie, 70
money shortage, 53
role in development of Columbia basin, 159
role in re-restoration of Columbia basin, 101–105
Bonytail chub, as endangered, and efforts to restore, 208–210
Bookcliffs, 167
Boulder Dam, 177
Boysen:
  Dam, 150
  Reservoir, 151
Bratton, Joe, 38
Breckenridge, 213, 214
Bristow, Russ, 82
Broadbent, Robert N., 16, 17, 30
Brown, Jerry, 31
Bureau of Indian Affairs, 141, 143, 146, 147, 149, 150, 151
Bureau of Land Management, 8
Bureau of Reclamation, 8, 16, 19, 53, 102, 104, 116, 129, 130, 131, 132, 137, 143, 147, 148, 150, 158, 159, 161, 176, 178, 182, 184, 185, 187, 201, 203–204, 210, 215
  as against cost-sharing, 22–23
budget and manpower, 1977–1986, 23
budget shrink, 16
inability to re-reclaim, 24–26
possible merge with Army Corps of Engineers, 19–20
Burton, Phil, 18
Cadillac Desert, 25
Calexico, 172
California, defined (for water use), 191
California Development Company, 172
California-Mexico Land and Cattle Company, 174
California Water Project, 41–42
Campbell, Hardy Webster, 126–127, 134
Canyonlands National Park, 167
Cardenas, Lazaro, 175
Carrels, Peter, 118, 124
Carter, Jimmy, 15–16, 149
Cataract Canyon, 167
Cedergreen, Mark, 84
Celilo Falls, fishery at, and loss of, 58, 59, 61, 76
  settlement for, and use of, 74–75, 77
Central Arizona Project, 5, 7, 23, 35, 152, 160, 162, 200–201
  financing, 27, 29
Central Utah Project, 3, 5, 10, 23, 29, 200–201
CFS, defined, 191–192
Chandler, Harry, 174
Channel degradation, 114
Cheyenne tribe, Northern, fight for water, 152
Childerhose, R. J., 64
Chinatown, 3, 204
Clark, William (Lewis and), 51, 54, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 68, 72, 86
Clean Water Act, 206
Clearwater River, 86
  outplants, 95
Cliff Dam, 27
Coachello Valley diversion, 160
The Colorado, 173
Colorado-Kansas Compact, 192
Colorado River Aqueduct, 35, 160, 199
Colorado River basin, 153–216
  average annual runoff, 4, 156
  average flow at river mouth, 4, 156
  basin size, 4, 156
beginnings of reform described, 11–12
development, compared to Missouri and Columbia, 112–113, 158–159
Eden Valley and Fontenelle Dam, 182–189
endangered fish, and efforts to restore, 208–210
headwaters of river, described, 165–170
hydropower capacity, 4, 156
irrigated land, 4, 156
logging problem, 205–208
map, 2–3, 154–155
new projects for, 200–202
“plumbing” described, 157–164
reservoir storage capacity, 4, 156
river length, 4, 156
river trips, 168–169
snowmaking, effect on water resources, 211–216
testing lake for pollution, 194–198
U.S. sharing water with Mexico, 171–181
upper basin vs. lower basin, 161–162
Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Act, 25
Colorado River Compact, 13, 31, 32, 159, 160, 176–177, 178, 192, 200
Colorado River Land Company, 174, 175, 180–181
Colorado River Water Conservation District, 214–215
Colorado Ski Country U.S.A., 213
Colorado Springs, 202
Colorado squawfish, as endangered, and efforts to restore, 208–210
Colorado Water Conservation Board, 204, 214
Columbia Basin Project, 69–70
Columbia Gorge, 67, 68, 70, 84
Columbia River basin, 47–105
average annual runoff, 4, 50
average flow at river mouth, 4, 50
basin size, 4, 50
beginnings of reform, 11, 51–53
Bonneville Power Administration and Pacific Northwest Electric Power and Conservation Council, 100–105
cooperation in reform, and U.S.-Canada Pacific Salmon Intervention Treaty, 81–85
damming of river, and results, 51, 59–60, 65–70, 87–88
development, compared to Colorado and Missouri, 112–113, 158–159
expansion, 5
fish wars, 81, 88, 101
hydropower capacity, 4, 50
Idaho’s part in salmon controversy, 86–96
Indian fisheries and their fights for fishing rights, 71–82
irrigated land, 4, 50
logging vs. fisheries, 97–99
map, 2–3, 48–49
reservoir storage capacity, 4, 50
river described, 66–67
river length, 4, 50
salmon, plight, and beginnings of restoration, 54–63, 209
Columbia River Compact, 78
Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, 78, 85, 105
formation of, 82–83, 91
reservations and ceded lands, map, 94
stand on wild vs. hatchery fish controversy, 92–96
The Columbia River Salmon and Steelhead Trout: Their Fight for Survival, 64
Compact, defined, 192
Coneflowers, 121
Conley, Jerry, 91, 92, 93, 95
Conner, Daniel Keith, 54, 64
Conrad, Kent, 138
Conservancy district, defined, 192
Continental Divide, 166, 199
Copper Mountain, 214
Corke, Phil, 149
Cost-sharing, 16–17, 18, 21–22, 26–27
Cotton, as crop, in southeast Arizona, 42–43, 45
Cow-calf operation, and water, 7–9
Cox, R. T., 151
Coyote, 122
Craig, Walter, 90, 91
Crandall, David, 187
Crested Butte, 163
CRITFC. See Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission
Cucapah Indians, 172, 173

Dakotas:
loss through Garrison, 132–139
loss through Pick-Sloan, and attempts to improve land, 114–116
The Dalles Dam, 59, 61, 74
Dam-icans, 5–14
Davis, Jay, 132
Davis, Jefferson, 125
Dawson, Robert K., 16–17, 21
Delk, Bob, 149
Dellenbaugh, Frederick, 167
Denver, 160, 201–202
Water Board, 214
Department of Agriculture, 203
Department of the Interior, 150
as against cost-sharing, 22–23
inability to reclaim, 20, 24–26
Desalination projects, 184, 203–205
Deschutes River, 75, 76, 77
Diamond Creek, 169
Diaz, General Porrírio, 172
Ditch riders, 141, 144–146
Diversion, defined, 192
Divisions to Front Range. See Front Range, diversions to
Dodge, Charles, 191
Dolores Project, 201
Dompier, Doug, 91, 94
Donaldson, Jack, 84
Dry farming, 125–127, 134
Duck factory, prairie pothole as, 121
Dunagan, Dan, 44, 45

Eagle River, 167
Earth First!, 157
Echeverria, Luis, 179, 180
Echohawk, Larry, 91, 93
Eden Valley, homesteading in, and salinity problem, 182–185
El Rio, 171–172
“Empty Victories,” 64
Endangered Species Act, 209
Environmental Defense Fund, 29, 30, 34, 37, 41
Environmental Policy Institute, 17, 22
Environmental Protection Agency, 99
Evans, John, 99
Evans, Raymond, 207

Farming, dry, 126–127, 134
Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, 104
Federal Fisheries Management, 64
Fertilizer, pollution from, 24
Fish and Wildlife Service, 209, 210

Fisheries:
controversy with logging, 97–99
Indian, described, 76
Indians’ rights to, and fights for rights, 77–82, 88–96
Shoshone-Bannock tribe’s fights to be included in rights, 88–96
Fish ladders, 84, 210
Fish Passage Center, 83
Fish wars, 81, 88, 101
Fish wheels, 73, 103
Flader, Susan, 64
Flaming Gorge:
Dam, 199, 209
Reservoir, 161
Flooding, in Mexicali Valley, 173–174
Flow at river mouth, average:
Colorado River basin, 4, 156
Columbia River basin, 4, 50
Missouri River basin, 4, 110
Fontenelle Dam, 183
building, 185–186
leaking, 186–187
Fontenelle Reservoir, 185
Ford, Pat, 86
Forest Service, 8, 98–99, 196, 205, 206, 207, 208
Fort Berthold Reservation, 137
Fort Bridger Treaty, 89
Fort Hall Reservation, 89
Fort Peck:
Compact, 152
Dam, 150
Reservation, 152
Fort Randall Dam, 150
Fort Washakie, 150
Fowler, Loretta, 150
Fradkin, Philip, 157
Fredericks, Tom, 151
Fremont Lake, 197
Friends of the Earth, 17
Front Range, diversion to, 3, 161, 162, 200, 201
Fulbright, J. W., 6

Gallatin River, 111
Galloway Group, 31–32
Game Management, 64
Garrison Dam, 136, 150
INDEX

Garrison Diversion Project, 5, 10, 18, 19, 23–24, 131
controversies over, 131–134
cost-sharing agreement, 26
pros and cons, 135–139
Garrison Extension, 133
Gavins Point Dam, 150
Gianelli, William R., 16, 22
Gila River, 178
Glen Canyon, 157, 199, 209
Dam, 157, 158, 162, 169, 170, 178
Glenwood Canyon, 167, 213, 214
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 62
Gold Medal Waters, 166
Gopher, 122
Gore:
Creek, 214
Range, 166
Gorge Lake, 197
Gottlieb, Bob, 28
Graff, Tom, 29, 30, 33, 34, 41, 42
Grain, crops in southeast Arizona, 45
Grain elevator, 121, 122
Gramm-Rudman-Hollings, 14, 16, 115, 139
Grand Canyon, 159–160, 169, 173, 199
Grand Ditch, 165
Grand Hogback, 167
Grand Junction, 159, 167
Grand Mesa, 167
Grand Valley:
Irrigation Company, 203
irrigation project, 159
salinity, and desalination, 203–205
Grapes, as new crop for Arizona, 45
Grasses, on prairies, described, 121
“Great American Desert,” 116, 125
Great Basin, map, 2–3
Grebe, 120
Greening, Chip, 105
Green Mountain Reservoir, 214, 215
Green River, 167, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 197
Greewalt, Lynn, 21
Gunnison National Forest, controversy over logging, 206–208
Gunnison River, 167, 192

Hanford, as possible nuclear waste dump, 70
Hanford Reach, 68
Harriman, Edward, 173, 174
Hart, Gary, 6
Hatcheries, funding for, 83
Hatchery fish, vs. wild, 92–96
Havasu Creek, 168
Havens, Tom, 37–40
Hayden, Carl, 7
HB No. 711, 99
Headwaters of Colorado, described, 165–170
Heath, Ellen, 76–77
Heath, Walter, 77
Heiberg, Lt. Gen. E. R., III, 21
Hells Canyon, 66, 70, 87
Hemmingway, Roy, 103
Herons, 120
Herschler, Ed, 6
Hodder, Eugene, 182–185
Hodder, James, 183–185
Hodel, Donald P, 24, 152
Hoover Dam, 31, 160, 169, 177, 199, 209
Horseshoe Canyon, 167
Hot Sulphur Springs, 166
Houk, Rose, 165
Hualapai Indian Reservation, 169
Humpback chub, as endangered, and efforts to restore, 208–210
Humphrey, Hubert, 179
Huser, Verne, 100
Hydropower capacity:
Colorado River basin, 4, 156
Columbia River basin, 4, 50
Missouri River basin, 4, 110

Idaho, loss of salmon, 86–96
Idaho State Department of Fish and Game, 85, 91–92, 93, 95
Idaho State Department of Health and Welfare, 98–99
Imperial Dam, 177, 199
Imperial Irrigation District, 31, 36, 37–40, 176
Imperial Valley, 160, 172, 184
Indian Affairs, Bureau of. See Bureau of Indian Affairs
Indian Peaks Wilderness Area, 211
Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, 74

Habitat, wildlife, loss of along Missouri, 113–114
Indians:
Columbia River fisheries and their fights for fishery rights, 71-82
fights for water rights and irrigation projects in Missouri basin, 147-152
fights for Wind River-Bighorn River water, 116-117, 140
gain of land from Garrison, 137
importance of salmon to, 71-72
loss of land from Pick–Sloan, 130
salmon fisheries of past, 55-59, 61
treaties, 73
Initiative 456, 84
Interior, Department of the. See Department of the Interior
International Boundary Water Commission, 177
Inter-Tribal Fish Commission
Irrigated land:
Colorado River basin, 4, 156
Columbia River basin, 4, 50
Missouri River basin, 4, 110
Irrigation, irrigated farming:
defined, 192
future in West, 19
push towards on plains, and development of, 126-134
on upper Missouri basin, problems, 142-143
Iverson, Peter, 150
Izaak Walton League, 17
Jacobson, 64
James River, under Garrison Project, 131-134, 137-139
Janklow, William, 133
Jefferson River, 111
Jim Bridger Power Plant, 187
Johnson, Lyndon, 64, 178
Jones, Hathaway, 56
Joseph, Chief, 65
Kah-Nee-Ta Vacation Resort, 75, 78
Kansas Settlement, Arizona, agricultural problems, and some new solutions, 42-45
Karpiscak, Martin, 44
Kathka, David, 185, 186
Kennedy, John F., 178
Kern Valley, problems, 42
Kesterton National Wildlife Refuge, selenium pollution at, 19, 20, 24-25, 137
Kettle Falls, 68
Keystone, 214
Khomeini, Ayatollah, 15
Kildeer, 120
Kissimmee River, re-meandering of, 22
Kraft Slough, 137
Kremmling, 215
Krze, Paul, 182
Ladders, fish, 84, 210
Laguna Dam, 179
Lake Fremont. See Fremont Lake
Lake Mead. See Mead, Lake
Lake Oahe. See Oahe, Lake
Lake Powell. See Powell, Lake
Lake Suicide. See Suicide Lake
Landau, Jack, 64
Land Management, Bureau of. See Bureau of Land Management
Las Sergas de Esplandian, 191
"The Law of the Pacific Salmon Fishery," 64
Law of the River, 32
Leavy, Edward, 91
Lee, Kai, 104
Lees Ferry, 168, 170
Length, river:
Colorado River basin, 4, 156
Columbia River basin, 4, 50
Missouri River basin, 4, 110
Leopold, Aldo, 60, 64
Lewis, Meriwether [and Clark], 51, 54, 57, 58, 59, 60, 68, 72, 86
Lewiston, 51, 68
Li Po, 195, 198
Little Colorado river, 168
Lochsa River, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61
Logging, 97-99, 206-208
Lolo Pass, 86
Lonetree Reservoir, 137
Long, Jack, 147, 148
Long Lakes, 197
Longs Peak, 166
Los Angeles, 35, 176
McClure, James, 149
McNary Dam, 93
McPhee Dam, 162, 201
Madison River, 111
Magnuson Act, 62
Mahar, Dulcy, 103
Management, as issue in Columbia fish conflicts, 92–96
Management and Budget, Office of. See Office of Management and Budget
Mansfield, Mike, 179
Marston, Ed, 5, 35, 51, 111, 135, 143, 157, 199
Mateos, Lopez, 178
Mead, Lake, 168, 169, 177, 199
Meadow Creek, proposed logging, 98–99
Meadowlark, 122
Metropolitan Water District (MWD), 31, 32, 35–40, 41, 201–202
Mexicali, Mexicali Valley, 160
sharing water with the U.S., 171–181
The Mexicali Rose, 175
Mexico, sharing Colorado River water with the U.S., 171–181, 202–205
Mexico Twelfth Inter-Parliamentary meeting, 179
Middle Park Hot Springs, 166
Midvale Project, 143, 147–152
Miller, George, 23, 24–25
interview, 18–21
Minute 242, 180
Missouri River basin, 107–152
average annual runoff, 4, 110
average flow at river mouth, 4, 110
basin size, 4, 110
damming of, results, 113
described, 111–112
development, compared to Colorado and Columbia, 112–113, 158–159
damming of, results, 113
damming of, results, 113
described, 111–112
damming of, results, 113
damming of, results, 113
history of development, 111–117
hydropower capacity, 4, 110
irrigated land, 4, 110
map, 2–3, 108–109
Midvale compared to Wind River, 147–152
Pick-Sloan plan, 130–131
proposal to re-reclaim, 114–115
reservoir storage capacity, 4, 110
clearcutting and overcutting, 206
Montalva, Garcia Ordonez de, 191
Montana Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission, 152
Moran, Mary, 169
Morelos Dam, 177, 178
Moser, Earl, 45
Mosher, Lawrence, 15
interview, 18–21
Mountain in the Clouds: A Search for the Wild Salmon, 64
Muddy Creek, proposed dam, 215
Multnomah Falls, 67
Myths, water, defined, 192
National Audubon Society, 17, 83, 132–133, 137
National Forest Management Act, 206
National Resources Defense Council, 34
National Wildlife Federation, 17, 21, 22, 27, 82, 104, 179
Navajo Dam, 199
Netboy, Anthony, 64
Never Summer Range, 165, 166
Newell, Lewis, 191
New Fork River, 197
Newlands Reclamation Act, 128–129
Nez Perce National Forest, 98
Nez Perce tribe:
Celilo Falls settlement, 73, 74
in CRITFC, 82, 92
fight for fishing rights, 90
reservation and ceded lands, map, 94
See also Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission
Nickel, George W., 33
Nitrogen oxide pollution, testing lake for, 194–198
North Dakota. See Dakotas
Northern California's Water Supply, 30
North Fork John Day Wilderness, 83
Northwest Indians Fisheries Commission, 83
Northwest Power Planning Act of 1980, 61, 62, 83
Northwest Power Planning Council, 65, 83
Northwest Regional Power Planning Act, 80
Nuclear activity, and water, 9

Oahe:
- Dam, 129, 131, 150
- Diversion Unit, proposed, 131–132
- Lake, 125, 131

Office of Arid Land Studies, 44

Office of Management and Budget, 149

Oil shale industry, collapse, 159, 162, 201

O'Mahoney, Joseph C., 185–186, 187

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, 84
Oregon Law Review, 206
Oregon Natural Resources Council, 83
Oregon Trail, 68
Oregon Trout, 83
Oregon Wildlife Federation, 84
Organic Act, 205
Orme Dam Project, 27
Osann, Ed, 22, 26
Outplants, 95
Owens River, 3, 20, 31, 204

Pacific Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Act, 102
Pacific Northwest Electric Power and Conservation Council, role in reclamation of Columbia River, 102–105
Pacific Northwest fish wars. See Fish wars
Pacific Power and Light Company, 187
Pacific Salmon, 64
Pacific Salmon Intervention Treaty. See U.S.-Canada Pacific Salmon Intervention Treaty
Pacific Salmon Treaty Coalition, 85
Paonia Ranger District, 206
Papago Reservation, fight for water, 152
“Paper” river, 160–161
Paria River, 170

Parker Dam, 199, 200
Parsons Water Resources, 38–40
Pasqueflowers, 121
Pavletich, Jerry, 85
Payette National Forest, damage by logging, 98
Peaches, as new crop for Arizona, 45
Pecans, as new crop for Arizona, 45
Pelton Dam, 75
Peripheral Canal Project, referendum defeat of, 30–31, 36, 41
Pesticides, pollution from, 24
Phoenix, 160, 162, 200
Pick-Sloan plan, 11, 14, 23, 113, 114–115, 130–134, 135, 159
Pierce, Franklin, 54
Pine Creek, 197
Pistachios, as new crop for Arizona, 45

Plains, northern:
dry farming, 126–127
as early settlers saw them, 124–126
Garrison Project, 131–134
importance and beauty of, 118–123
irrigation projects, beginnings of, 127–130
Pick-Sloan plan, 130–131
Platte River, 116
Plumbing, Colorado River as, 157
Politics, western, and water, 5–11
Pollution, problem of, 19, 20, 24–25, 137, 194–198
Portland General Electric, 75
Porzak, Glenn E., 215, 216
Powell, John Wesley, 45, 127, 130, 165, 166, 167
Powell, Lake, 158, 167, 178, 199
Prairie chickens, 122
Prairies, importance and beauty of, 118–123. See also Plains, northern
Project Bold, 100
“Promising a Process for Parity,” 64
Pronghorn antelope, 122
Public Service Company, 160, 214

Quillen, Ed, 190

Rabbit, 122
Rainmaking research, 127
Raptor, 122
Rawlins, C. L., 194
Razorback sucker, as endangered, and efforts to restore, 208–210
Reagan, Ronald, 15, 28, 30, 31
Reasonable diligence, defined, 192
Reclamation, Bureau of. See Bureau of Reclamation
Reclamation, defined, 193
Reclamation Safety of Dams Act, 27
Reclamation Service, 149–150
Recreational industry, as use for Colorado upper basin water, 162–163
Red blazing star, 121
Reisner, Marc, 25
Representation, as issue in Columbia fish conflicts, 90–91
Reservoir storage capacity:
Colorado River basin, 4, 156
Columbia River basin, 4, 50
Missouri River basin, 4, 110
Ring-necked pheasant, 122
Rio Buenaventura, 192
Rio Colorado Irrigation District, 177
Rio Mimbres decision, 207
A River No More, 157, 169
Roaring Fork River, 167
Roberts, Hadley, 97
Rock Springs, 184, 186, 187
Rocky Mountain National Park, 165, 166, 211
Roncalio, Teno, 140
Roosevelt, Franklin D., 150
Roosevelt, Theodore, 128, 173, 176
Ruby Canyon, 167
Ruedi Reservoir, 210
Runoff, annual:
Colorado River basin, 4, 156
Columbia River basin, 4, 50
Missouri River basin, 4, 110

Sage, Allison, 145–146
Sagebrush Rebellion, 100
Sahaptins, way of life and treaties, 72, 73
Salinity:
defined, 193
Salinity Control Act of 1974, 203
Salmon:
effects of dams on, 87–88
efforts to save, 11, 51–52, 62–63, 83

hatchery vs. wild, 60–61, 83, 89, 92–95
importance of to Indian way of life, 68, 71–73
plight of, 54–62, 82, 86–88, 209
U.S.-Canada Pacific Salmon Intervention Treaty, 62, 80, 85
Salmon and Steelhead Conservation and Enhancement Act of 1980, 88
Salmon Fishers of the Columbia, 64
Salmon River, 67, 86
"Salmon scam," 78, 80
Salt. See Salinity
Salt Lake City, 200
Salton Sea, 36, 173
A Sand County Almanac, 64
San Diego County Water Authority, 31–32
San Juan-Chama diversion, 3
Saxvik, Bob, 105
Seattle, Chief, 54, 63
Seattle Master Builders, 104
Seedskadee Project, 185, 186
Seedskadee Wildlife Refuge, 189
Selenium pollution, at Kesterton National Wildlife Refuge, 19, 20, 24–25, 137
Selway River, 98
Sex, compared to water, 193
Sharp, Philip R., 18, 24
Sherar's Falls, 76, 77
Shoshone, fights for water and land, 149, 150–151
Shoshone-Bannock tribe:
entry into U.S. v. Oregon, 91
loss of fisheries, 88–96
reservation and ceded lands, map, 94
view on wild vs. hatchery controversy, 92–96
Shoshone hydroelectric power plant, 160–161, 214, 215
Shreves, Charles, 38
Sierra Club, 17, 163
Silvercreek Ski Area, 211, 212, 213
Size, basin:
Colorado River basin, 4, 156
Columbia River basin, 4, 50
Missouri River basin, 4, 110
Ski industry, snowmaking, and water use, 163, 211–216
Sky-watching, on plains, 122
Smith, Courtland, 64
Smith, Kenneth, 78–79
Snake River, 70
damming of, 59–60, 87–88
described, 66–67
Snow, man-made vs. natural, 211–212
Snowmaking, and water use, 162–163, 211–216
Soil Conservation Service, 25, 184, 203
Sonoita, 45
Sorghum, as crop in southeast Arizona, 45
South Dakota. See Dakotas
South Dakota Department of Water and Natural Resources, 133
Southern Pacific Railroad Company, 173, 174, 176
South Fork of Salmon River, damage by logging, 98
Spawning habitat, salmon, protecting, 83
Squirrel, 122
Steamboat, 213
Steelhead trout, 68, 72, 82
Stevens Gulch, controversy over logging, 206–208
Stowell, Cynthia D., 71, 77, 79
Suicide Lake, 197
Sulfur pollution, testing lake for, 194–198
Sulphur Springs Valley, agricultural problems, 42–44
Summit County, 214
Sunflowers, 121
Symms, Steve, 99

Taayer Reservoir, 137
Teal, 120
Tejon Ranch, 33
Technical Advisory Committee, 92
Tenneco, 32, 33
Tenney, Jack B., 175
Terrazas, Don Gustavo, 174
Teton Dam, 187
There Once Was a River Called Missouri, 114
Thinking Like a Mountain, 64
Thistle, 121
Through the Looking Glass, 191
Tijuana, 181
Timber industry, at Warm Springs, 75, 78
Tourism, at Warm Springs, 75, 78
Towne, Douglas, 41
Tozer, 64
Tragedy of the commons, 62
Trail Ridge Road, 165
Trava, Jose, 171
Trim, Marj, 64
Trot Unlimited, 85
Tucson, 44, 160, 162, 200
“Turn-on cards,” 141
Twitchell, Louis, 145, 147, 148
Two Forks Project, proposed, 201

Udall, Morris, 7
Umatilla River, 69
Umatilla tribe:
Celilo Falls settlement, 73, 74
in CRITFC, 82
fight for fishing rights, 90
reservation and ceded lands, map, 94
See also Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission
Uncompahgre Plateau, 167
Union Pacific Railroad, 186
United Family Farmers, 131, 132
U.S.-Canada Pacific Salmon Intervention Treaty, 62, 80, 85
U.S. v. Oregon, 77, 81–82, 83, 90, 91
U.S. v. Washington, 77, 81–82
Uphill, defined, 193
Upper Colorado River Project, 186

Vail, 212, 213, 215, 216
Associates, 215
Dam, 214
Velazquez, Felipa, 175
Virgin land homesteading, in Wyoming, and salinity, 182–185

Wagon, William, 144–145
Wapato, Timothy, 85, 105
Warm Springs Power Enterprises, 75
Warm Springs tribe, 71–72, 83–84
Celilo Falls settlement, 73, 74, 75
in CRITFC, 82
fight for fishing rights, 90
as leader in asserting treaty rights, 76–80
reservation and ceded lands, map, 94
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>timber industry, 75, 78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tourism, 75, 78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See also Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasco/Wishrams, way of life and treaties, 72, 73, 78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Department of Fisheries, 84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Public Power Supply System (WPPSS), 11, 41, 42, 52, 83, 101</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington State Charter Boat Association, 85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington State Sportsmen’s Council, 84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water budget program, for salmon, 61, 102</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Budget Center, 83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water-crats, 5–14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water marketing, 20–21, 28–40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water masters, 141, 144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Resources Council, 15–16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water rights, defined, 193</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waters, Frank, 173</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watt, James, 22, 23, 30, 100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather watching, on prairies, 122</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webb, Walter Prescott, 126</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellton-Mohawk Valley, 178</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welsh, Mark, 206, 207, 208</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western worldview, 9–11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westlands Water District, 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westwater Canyon, 167</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wetlands Trust, 137</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheels, fish, 73, 103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitman, Walt, 118</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild fish, vs. hatchery fish, 92–96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildflowers, on prairies, described, 121</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife and wildlife habitat:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lost of, along the Missouri, 113–114</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on prairies, described, 120–121, 122</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife Federation, 84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife Management Institute, 17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiley, Peter, 28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkerson, Bill, 84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkinson, Charles F, 54, 64, 206</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilcox, 44, 45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willey, Zach, 30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams, Chuck, 65, 81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wind in the Willows, 167</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wind River-Big Horn River, dispute for the water, 116–117, 140</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wind River Irrigation Project, 141, 143</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compared to Midvale, 147–152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wind River Mountains, 184</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windy Gap, 193</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windygap, defined, 193</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine grapes, as new crop for Arizona, 45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter Park, 213, 214</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winters Doctrine water rights, 117, 140, 151</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Cup races, 212</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPPSS. See Washington Public Power Supply System</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>battle for Wind River-Big Horn River water, 116–117, 140</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>southwest, as virgin territory for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>homesteaders, and salinity, 182–185</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming Wildlife Federation, 163</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yakima Basin Enhancement Program, 102</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yakima River, 66, 69, 70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yakima tribe:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asserting treaty fishing rights, 79, 90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celilo Falls settlement, 73, 74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in CRITFC, 82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reservation and ceded lands, map, 94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See also Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yallup, Bill, 102</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Yampa River, proposed dam at, 32</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yellowstone River, 111, 116</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yellowtail Dam, 150</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Zumaya, Don Ramon, 172</td>
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High Country News
Western Water Made Simple
Edited by Ed Marston

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