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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Blake Gumprecht. *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. x + 369 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6047-8.



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Many rivers have been transformed by human activities in the last two hundred years. These activities have included channelization, impoundment, domestic and industrial pollution, sand and gravel mining, domestic and agricultural water withdrawal, and introduction of exotic species. The Los Angeles River basin has been subjected to all of these and provides a useful case history of why these activities were necessary and what the effects have been. In addition, the book often explores the social and political climate surrounding the implementation of these activities. As such, the book is a useful reference for those directly associated with the Los Angeles River and provides insight for those working to enhance or maintain aesthetic qualities of urban river systems in general.

The introduction briefly discusses the Los Angeles River's history and traces public perception of it through time to the current notion of it as, "little more than a local joke" (p. 1). However, a current river revitalization movement has prompted increased attention and apparently a need "for a more complete telling of its history" (p. 5). The introduction does an excellent job of piquing the readers' curiosity but fails to clearly articulate the necessity of the present work. For example, why must this book be written at the present time and what will its legacy be? Are there aspects of the river's history that are

meant to guide the movement to revitalize its course? A better defined purpose would help clue readers in to the important lessons that the river's history can teach.

The book presents the history of the Los Angeles River in six chapters that are essentially chronological. Chapter one presents an excellent synopsis of the river's historical hydrology, geomorphology, plant and animal life, and its importance to Native American culture. One map (fig. 1.1) and two photos (figs. 1.2 and 1.3) help orient the reader and provide a glimpse of what the river basin must have looked like. Chapter one also discusses the arrival of the Spanish in the area and provides quotes from these early explorers that further help convey the early condition of the river. This chapter provides an excellent origin for subsequent chapters to trace river basin changes.

Chapter two traces early development (i.e., about 1770-1870) of the Los Angeles area from an agricultural settlement dependent on river water for irrigating crops like grapes and fruit to its beginnings as a regional trading center, especially following the gold rush and completion of the transcontinental railroad. This transition from rural to urban settlement led to problems with water supply and domestic water pollution and stimulated enactment of the region's first water laws. This chapter

detailed the importance of the Los Angeles River to the growing community and highlighted many of the legislative (e.g., issuing bonds) and judicial (e.g., lawsuits) processes that led to hydrological changes.

Chapter three details the increasing urban population, from 1870 to the present, that necessitated a greater water supply and led to pollution problems from domestic and industrial sources. The need for more water led to the near complete elimination of surface flow in the river, except during floods. This loss of surface flow led to a public view of apathy for the river that still hinders restoration efforts. The importance of legislative and judicial processes along with the influence of the news media were again highlighted as the means which galvanized actions to change the river. The many historical photographs (e.g., 3.5 and 3.12) help convey the substantial changes made to the Los Angeles River. One strength of this chapter is the detailed discussion of judicial, legislative, and news media processes that should prove valuable for persons trying to initiate restoration projects today.

Chapter four connects the hydrology and geomorphology of the river basin with the uncontrolled urban development that eventually led to catastrophic floods in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Changes like land use conversion from native vegetation to urban pavement, removal of river bed substrates, development of levees and railroads, and building of homes and businesses in floodplains and old river channels are discussed. The loss to human life and estimates of monetary damage, with current estimates included, provide an understanding of why subsequent flood control works (chapter 5) were necessary.

Chapter three's discussion of the development of public apathy toward the river combined with the history of flooding (chapter four) helped set the stage for the widespread flood control activities detailed in chapter five. Localized flood protection plans often failed due to lack of coordination among agencies, lack of funds, and lack of technical knowledge. Effective, widespread flood control measures were finally initiated in the 1930s when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers became involved. Completed flood control works include reinforced concrete channels with paved banks and bottoms, removal of stream side vegetation, raising bridges, and development of debris basins and concrete dams at various basin locations. The many historical photographs are again excellent illustrations of the massive changes made to the Los Angeles River. Figure 5.26 is especially

effective in this regard.

Chapter six details the current movement to revitalize the river. Beginning with a short synopsis of previous chapters, this chapter recounts changes to the rivers flora and fauna mentioned previously in chapter one. Three areas of the river retaining some aspects of its original character and providing limited ecological and aesthetic benefits are discussed. Subsequent discussions focus on urban river revitalization movements in general, and proposals and actions to revitalize the Los Angeles River in particular. The chapter concludes with recent flood control activities in anticipation of heavy El Nino-driven rains expected in 1997-98, thus providing a nice contrast between river revitalization and flood control philosophies.

Whereas previous chapters are somewhat straightforward in detailing various aspects of the history of the Los Angeles River, chapter six had the potential to advance the current state of understanding. The author stated in chapter six that "...it is worth taking a final step back in time to examine the nature of these proposals (for river revitalization), to try to determine why they failed, to analyze what the proposals and their failure might tell us about human attitudes toward the river, and to ascertain whether earlier experiences provide any lessons for those now working to resurrect the river" (p. 259). While the author does an excellent job summarizing proposals, he could have greatly advanced the importance of this book by synthesizing, possibly in table format, themes common to all proposals discussed, including their successes and failures. In fact, synthesizing common themes from chapters three through five would probably have been helpful also. The book's current conclusion sort of leaves the reader questioning its impact and ramification. Common themes that could have been synthesized include socio-political actions, news media formats, and judicial cases that succeeded in changing the river. For example, what were the mechanisms in these activities that galvanized people to alter the river environment? Identification of these mechanisms could aid revitalization efforts for other urban rivers.

Overall, the book was extremely well written. Only four spelling errors were found. The book flowed nicely and the general chronological order was effective. The historical information, maps, and photographs in chapter one were excellent, but the book seemed overly skewed to structural modifications of the river. More information on temporal ecological changes, if it exists, would have complemented structural changes discussed throughout.

A general map, on the inside cover for quick reference, of current streets, landmarks, and other areas frequently mentioned, would help orientate readers unfamiliar with the Los Angeles area. The book provides an excellent summary of the many changes the Los Angeles river has undergone. Documentation of long term changes to urban river systems are few and this book provides a useful reference point for future historians, environmental activists, municipal planners, and others involved with the

Los Angeles River to consult. More broadly, the lessons learned and implications from the story of the Los Angeles River can guide other river revitalization efforts, even though readers must synthesize this information themselves.

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