

The desert's limited lifeblood

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An acquaintance and I were comparing notes the other day on how we like living here. I called out one element I find challenging: the wind. He looked at me incredulously and said: “We live in a desert. What do you expect?”

What a perfect response, especially coupled with his reminder that he lives in a town called Hurricane. Indeed, we live in a desert. According to data from the Western Regional Climate Center, based on a period of record from 1862 to 2006, the St. George area received an annual precipitation average of 8.25 inches. The lowest during this period was 3.55 inches. In other words, we have chosen to live in a place that, by its nature, requires a conservative attitude toward water use. Water is our lifeblood.

Looking at the Colorado River Basin as a whole, last year the Bureau of Reclamation released the “Colorado River Basin Water Supply and Demand Study,” which indicates we have been living beyond our means, with water use in the basin exceeding supply for the past 10 years, a trend forecasted to continue. In addition, climate change scenarios predict an increase in the occurrence of the basin’s dry years.

If the Lake Powell pipeline were to be built, I can’t help but wonder what happens once we’ve become accustomed to its supply, which then may not be enough — a scenario that will happen in time, given increased population growth in Washington County, future shortages within the Colorado River Basin and the effects of climate change. Do we adapt now to life in the desert, or do we commit ourselves to greater demands based on increased supply and the problematic questions about how to cope when we can no longer meet those demands?

Ironically, the project’s namesake, John Wesley Powell, had a compelling notion of how to survive in arid country over the long haul — a concept termed “watershed democracy.” Although most of our jurisdictional boundaries are not drawn to match watershed boundaries, as Powell had recommended, the result of having locally available and managed water supplies is still possible. It’s possible in Washington County thanks to a thoughtful alternative to the Lake Powell Pipeline spearheaded by Western Resource Advocates and Citizens for Dixie’s Future.

The “Local Waters Solution,” <http://www.westernresourceadvocates.org/water/powell.php>, puts forth the practices of conservation, water reuse and agricultural water transfers. These align with the conservative management of our water demands essential to living in a desert. The solution also affords the ability to guide our water future at the area level, and thereby adapt toward sustainability.

To spend more than \$1 billion in order to become dependent on a water supply well outside of our immediate watershed, one that is subject to myriad political, legal and environmental factors, seems a risky investment. And to not recognize that the desert is an unforgiving place to live — just like the wind can’t be controlled, we can’t arrange an ever-growing water supply — is even riskier.

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