

Title: Rethinking John Wesley Powell: How Do We Bridge Science, Policy, & Practice 150 Years after Powell's 1869 Expedition?

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Proposal Type: Oral Presentation

The patron saint of the Colorado River Basin and Western water development is indisputably John Wesley Powell, the one-armed Civil War veteran who explored the Colorado River Basin by boat, foot, and horseback between 1868 and 1872. As a government bureaucrat, Powell thought deeply about what the growth and development of the West and its resources should look like, and he envisioned a West very different than the one we have today. Powell is generally thought of today as a farsighted planner, a man who had the on-the-ground experience to understand and articulate the landscape's limits, and in this he stands today as the model for bridging science, policy, and practice. But such a focus on Powell and his status as a larger-than-life figure in Western water and Colorado River Basin history has obscured the wide range of factors and influences that shaped water development in the West. Rethinking Powell reveals a much more diverse history of the Colorado Basin, one that challenges long-held assumptions about the West and its water.

Next summer marks the sesquicentennial of Powell's 1869 journey down the Green and Colorado rivers and provides us with an opportunity to revisit Powell's life and legacy in the twenty-first century. Policymakers, boaters, scientists, and members of the public alike still see Powell as the founding father of Western water history, policy, river running, and science. Conservationists look to him and his map of the West divided by watershed as a model of what could have been had the U.S. government listened to a reasoned approach to development. River runners praise him as the original whitewater boater, despite the fact that Powell really didn't like running rapids at all. Water developers see in his work the recognition that the arid West presented a unique challenge to a nation accustomed to a more humid climate east of the hundredth meridian and that such a challenge would require an unprecedented approach.

With the 150th anniversary of his journey from Green River, Wyoming to the mouth of the Virgin River, we have an opportunity to rethink what John Wesley Powell means for the American West and its water. This presentation will ask how we as water practitioners can both learn from how Powell bridged disciplines while also acknowledging and looking deeper into the complex political, cultural, global, and scientific context of Powell's time that played an equal if not greater role in the development of the West. In other words, how can we move away from the centrality of the myth and celebrity of Powell while also recognizing his monumental contribution to the public perception and development of the Colorado River Basin?