

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Bessire, Lucas. Running out: in search of water on the High Plains. 264 pp., maps, illus., bibliogr. Princeton: Univ. Press, 2021. £22.00 (cloth)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1zj9g360>

Journal

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 30(1)

ISSN

1359-0987

Author

Sizek, Julia

Publication Date

2024-03-01

DOI

10.1111/1467-9655.14083

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Review of *Running Out*, Lucas Bessire
 By Julia Sizek, UC Berkeley

Studies of groundwater often begin with three truths: people turn to groundwater when surface water runs out, we don't know enough about groundwater, and we're likely using more than we should.

These truths are also the basic premise of *Running Out*, Lucas Bessire's ethnography and family memoir of aquifer depletion in the American High Plains. In this creative and extremely readable book, he tracks the social and environmental crisis of the aquifer through the stories of the people who live it, broadly arguing against managerial approaches to groundwater. Instead, he considers the human stories that reveal how we got to the point that "a controlled decline" seems like the best solution to our problems (15). The book is neither a proper ethnography nor a proper memoir. Perhaps it's best to call it nonfiction, the category under which it was a finalist for the American National Book Award.

The subject of this book is the Ogallala Aquifer, the largest aquifer in the United States, which underlies approximately 174,000 sq. mi. (450,000 km²) of land in America's breadbasket. Its massive size and multiple jurisdictions mean that the aquifer is difficult to manage. Add in a history of underregulation and the rise of industrial farming, and it's no surprise that more water is being pumped out of the aquifer than re-enters.

As Bessire tells it, what's so pernicious about the aquifer depletion is that the solution to every agricultural problem seems to be to pump more water: farmers' debt leads to more pumping (42), as does the corporatization of farming (78). So does the commodification of water (108) and the search for short-term profits (160). Even groundwater management strategies lead to increased water extraction (172). Groundwater is always the solution to the myriad crises of overproduction and the backstop for when surface water runs out.

Aquifers are much more complex than the scientific models we make for them, and overpumping often comes with unintended downstream effects (110). One example of this is the relationship between surface water and groundwater: Overpumping groundwater drops the water table, can cause land subsidence, and can lead streams and springs to run dry. Bessire chronicles how his great-grandfather RW's pumping dried up a local spring and creek on which animals had relied. But this did not stop RW or others from pumping, as "water became fused with hopes of all kinds" (88), and was also the basis of his farming operation.

Today, hope, like groundwater, is running out. The realities of depletion are becoming clearer in the Great Plains and elsewhere. While some are trying to figure out how to control or manage decline through institutions, others are simply pumping more. Bessire shares stories like that of "Hay Guy," who, watching the water deplete underneath him, insists that economics will solve problems better than experts or the government can (79-82). He also follows do-gooders who test lawsuits to reduce pumping only to find hollow victories. "The problem is," one do-gooder says, "I tried to work within the system" (158).

Depletion leaves the Great Plains in a pickle. While the past was premised in dreams of endless growth underpinned by excessive consumption, past solutions will no longer work for present problems. Relying on groundwater more will not solve the problem of depletion, nor will the current system of groundwater rights.

This book does not provide policy solutions, but instead attempts to illuminate the problem of aquifer depletion as one of "running out." As a metaphor, running out suggests time ticking down as the aquifer dwindles beneath our feet, a ticking time bomb before irreversible change. But the metaphor also brings to mind the broken pieces that are left

behind when someone runs out, and how evading responsibility for overpumping is how we got here.

In this way, *Running Out* is about trying to reckon with a past that haunts one own present, in which a system of senior water rights benefited Bessire's great-grandfather RW's farm but saddled his great-uncle with debt and made a once-Elysian valley into a dry creekbed (20). How does one attempt to repair this harm, and who will take responsibility? The problem is neither purely one of evil capitalists nor incompetent bureaucrats; it's a system that people made and today inherit that privileges today's use at the cost of the future. How to create a future path that avoids our past mistakes is an open question.

Review Length: 731 words