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Review of *Eau Canada: The Future of Canada's Water*. Edited by Karen Bakker.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Eau Canada: The Future of Canada's Water. Edited by Karen Bakker. Foreword by David Schindler. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2007. xix + 417 pp. Photographs, figures, maps, tables, appendixes, notes, references, index. \$85.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

We've been weighed, measured, and found wanting—such is the inevitable conclusion on reading *Eau Canada*, a tour de force critique of Canadian water policy.

Karen Bakker has assembled an impressive list of contributors from academia and civil society, including internationally renowned physical and social scientists and prominent former civil servants. Lavishly referenced and weighing in at a hefty 400-plus pages, the book is broken into five main sections on current governance systems, jurisdictional fragmentation, privatization and markets, pathways to better management, and world-views. Despite its heft, *Eau Canada* is a compelling read. A key message repeated in several chapters is that the federal government has largely ignored the principles set out in its own 1987 Federal Water Policy, which declared an overall objective of encouraging “the use of freshwater in an efficient, and equitable manner consistent with the social, economic, and environmental needs of present generations.” A related point—though not commented on by any of the volume's contributors—is that the federal government has also failed to meet its international commitment to develop national Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) policies, made at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002.

Such policy gaps would not appear quite so glaring were it not for the skill with which Bakker and company skewer the myth of Canada as a water-wise and water-abundant country. Instead, they point out numerous examples of water mismanagement and water scarcity. Of note for readers of *Great Plains Research* is that no particular attention is paid to an observation made elsewhere by one of the contributors (David Schindler) and by the International Institute for Sustainable Development that the Canadian Prairies illustrate characteristic vulnerabilities of dryland agroecosystems to climate change and nutrient overenrichment described by the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment as one of *the* major global environment issues.

Eau Canada's authors do observe that despite growing evidence of regional water scarcity, the provinces that

essentially exercise all real power and jurisdiction over water resources planning and management possess very few mechanisms for reallocating water rationally. In far too many cases the doctrine of prior appropriation trumps reason. In an excellent chapter on watershed governance, however, geographers Rob de Loë and Reid Kreutzweier document spontaneous common property norms emerging in southern Alberta where licensed irrigators all chose equal curtailment to ensure all had some water during a particularly severe drought episode, circumventing standing regulations but with the province's full support.

One of the book's key insights, familiar to students of complex systems theory and the work of the Resilience Alliance, is that effective water resources management is too complex to be dealt with by traditional top-down and fragmented governance structures. The best role for the state is to provide adequate support to the appropriate local institutions that can legitimately attempt integration across land and water resource issues—the hallmark of the watershed-based IWRM. Provincial government agencies are now conducting uncoordinated and independent experiments in Integrated Water Resources Management, known variously as the Alberta Water for Life Strategy, the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority, Manitoba Water Stewardship, and Ontario's Source Water Protection Program, without federal coordination and with little federal funding.

The federal government's disengagement is not the only governance problem. In Ontario basic issues of municipal planning coherence and deference to source water protection strategies remain contested, in spite of the Source Water Protection program's origins in the aftermath of the Walkerton tragedy, when seven people died after drinking *E. coli* contaminated water in May 2000. The Walkerton incident occurred when livestock manure contaminated the town's drinking water supply following extreme rainfall. At a time when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change makes abundantly clear that watersheds will be increasingly buffeted by climate change impacts like the Walkerton extreme event, *Eau Canada* reveals that we have systematically disinvested in the institutional capacity for proper management.

All is not woe for the water-worried in Canada. Although the book's contributors do not rule out the possibility of large-scale water diversions to the United States

under the North American Free Trade Agreement, the consensus opinion is that sheer cost makes such projects highly unlikely. Editor Bakker explores the prospect of private sector participation in the water sector and through comparative analysis reveals its many warts, but also some counterintuitive successes, including the completely privatized but publicly regulated delivery of water in the Netherlands and a hybrid public-private water utility in the fiercely socialist city of Porto Alegre, Brazil—home of the World Social Forum. In a related chapter on water markets, economist Ted Horbulyk astutely observes that the use of economic instruments can help ration scarce water, but not when grafted onto an underdeveloped water governance structure, which he argues is the rule rather than the exception in Canada.

In the section on pathways to better management, *Eau Canada* hits its full stride, arguing that the federal government must fulfill its constitutional obligation for “peace, order and good government” by providing coordination, resources, robust governance frameworks, and real leadership for watershed-based water resource stewardship. One of the central features of that new governance framework, argue Oliver Brandes and colleagues, is a fierce commitment to water conservation through a “soft paths approach” where water is better understood as service rather than an end in itself—“the key to unlocking society’s potential to address long-term prosperity and water sustainability.”

Eau Canada is an enormous contribution to the nation’s contemporary water policy discourse and a call to arms. Its sheer comprehensiveness makes it an invaluable resource for academics, civil society policy activists, and practitioners needing a broader context for their daily professional challenges. **Henry David Venema**, *Sustainable Natural Resources Management Program, International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg.*