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State's water policies kill fish, expert says

'Cadillac Desert' author speaks to an overflow crowd

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When Marc Reisner talks about water in California, people listen. And some people get mad.

The acclaimed author of "Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water," spoke to an overflow crowd Monday night in the Social Science building on the UC Davis campus. The talk was part of his stay as distinguished visiting professor in the UCD department of geology.

It was titled "How California Can Avoid a Water Crisis — and Why We Won't."

Reisner's residence at UCD is sponsored by the John Muir Institute for the Environment, the UCD Commission on the Environment, the Department of Geology and the UCD Center for Integrated Watershed Science and Management.

Reisner began his lecture by saying he's been accused of being a "dam hater."

"I do not hate *all* dams," he said to the impervious laughter of the audience, apparently well-versed on Reisner's view on the subject.

Reisner spoke of an ongoing water crisis in the state, including the depletion of native species — especially fish — at an astounding rate.

Much of the problem lies in Northern California supplying much of Southern California's water — and the untenable system by which California transports that water.

Reisner said droughts or earthquakes could lead to a mass levy failure and the inundation of saltwater contamination, weakening the water supply and leaving the L.A. area with half its usual water.

"Some people think that's a charming thought ... (but) the last thing we want is to have those people here," he said, to the crowd's amusement.

Much of the water conflict lies between environmentalists and urban water users. Diverting water to urban sources keeps it out of rivers, diminishing wildlife habitat.

Reisner went on to enumerate three main steps to help stymie the water crisis in California: taking down dams, more conservation and restoration work, and the use of more underground water storage.

"We built too many of the damn things," Reisner said on the subject of dams, especially on salmon rivers. Ninety-six percent of habitat for certain species lie behind dams, he explained. Even relatively small dams can be "efficient fish killers," he said.

He said he wasn't suggesting taking down all dams or any major ones.

But he equated the ecological situation in California to the Pacific Northwest which "did everything but take down dams," to help fortify salmon populations. The state built fish ladders and literally trucked spawning salmon up and down mountains in hopes of saving the population.

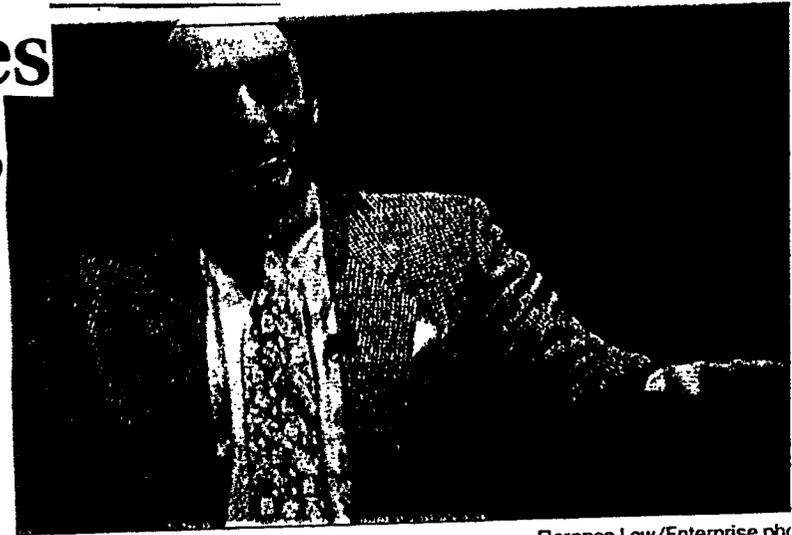
This resulted in zero progress, Reisner said.

Along with lack of fish habitat, California's natural diversity has the added threat of mass invasion of exotic species, making the dam situation even more urgent, Reisner said. He called the Delta the "most invaded ecosystem in the Western hemisphere."

He suggested not only greatly reducing current water usage, but increasing water metering.

He then suggested the controversial idea of building a peripheral canal capable of meeting the urban water needs of Southern California.

The debate has become almost a theological issue, widening the divide between the northern and southern halves of the state, he said.



Florence Low/Enterprise photo

AT UCD: Distinguished visiting Professor Marc Reisner makes a point

"We need to get beyond theology and talk biology."

Touching on the second half of the title of his talk — and Why We Won't," Reisner said we've been "schnookered by the idea of consensus," which he called a false political god, impeding action.

"If someone objects loudly and strongly enough, change doesn't happen," he said. Reisner gave the example of the crowd in the room, which he estimated at 400. If 50 people opposed a matter, the issue wouldn't be considered to have consensus agreement. No one seems to be able to agree on what to do about water in California, he said.

"We need to get back to the idea of the greatest good for the greatest number ... The consensus conundrum always gets in the way." He suggested people demonstrate "the boldness that got us into this fix in the first place."

Reisner said that if people had the audacity to establish cities in places humans arguably shouldn't be — like the arid Los Angeles area — we should also take bold measures to avoid the fate of almost every desert settlement that preceded us. Most of those civilizations tapped their water sources and failed, he explained.

Reisner also brought up the controversial issue of free-market policies of groundwater banking and water transfer.

When Reisner then opened up the talk for discussion, the ecologically educated crowd grew impassioned.

They brought up issues of mercury contamination, global warming, over-population and the logistics of putting a price on water.

Reisner, who began his talk by saying he would probably offend everyone in the room by the end of the talk, was unrattled.

"These are suggestions, not answers," he said. With so much habitat and resources gone, we are really "trying to save pieces" of what's left, he said.