



## Reflections: The Importance of Dialogue, Process, and Participation

by Sharon B. Megdal

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I write this after participating in the American Water Resources Association (AWRA) annual conference, which was held November 9-11, 2020. Though delivered virtually, the highly engaging conference had all the richness and much of the structure of an in-person event in terms of schedule and sessions, as can be seen by visiting the [conference website](#). Alongside the live plenary and featured panel sessions were topical sessions, which were a combination of pre-recorded presentations and live question and answer discussions. I congratulate the conference committee and staff for making the complex pivot to virtual delivery. As an AWRA board member, I contributed in a limited way: In addition to the interactive panel I organized on Wicked Water Problems, I recommended two University of Arizona (UArizona) colleagues, Dr. Diana Liverman and Dr. Karletta Chief, as speakers for two other panels. Now that the conference is over, I am struck by how our three distinct panels addressed some of the same fundamental issues of dialogue, process, and participation. However, before I address some key take-aways, I will offer comments on the conference experience itself and, given that I am involved in planning multiple conferences, invite you to share with me ([smegdal@arizona.edu](mailto:smegdal@arizona.edu)) some of your experiences with virtual conferences now that we are eight months into the COVID-19 pandemic.

This conference resembled other conferences in that tough choices had to be made in terms of which sessions to attend. In fact, the panels featuring my two colleagues were set at the same time. Fortunately, their presentations did not fully overlap, so I was able to move from one virtual conference room to the other fairly seamlessly – in fact easier than might have been the case at an in-person conference. Some events that are so important at in-person conferences were indeed different. The conference reception featured a competitive trivia game, which kept the participants engaged and was fun! The awards luncheon program was the same as it might have been had we assembled in-person, sans lunch service of course. The sponsors' exhibits were of course different. Interestingly, there was a higher than usual level of student engagement through posters and registrations. All in all, the conference kept me busy and involved.

What were my conference take-aways related to water resources management and policy? Here, I would like to focus on some key issues discussed at the three sessions involving my two UArizona colleagues and me. The Wicked Water Problems session featured Lisa Beutler of Stantec Consulting Services, Inc., who introduced me to the concept of wicked problems in water at the 2016 Water Resources Research Center (WRRC) Annual Conference. Readers who follow my activities will know that I've spoken and written on this topic quite a bit in 2020. Lisa provided a great overview of what characterizes wicked problems. She noted that societal wicked problems, such as poverty, sustainability, equality, health and wellness, and water, are problems of indeterminate scope and scale. Her remarks were followed by those of Betsy A. Cody of Cody Research & Consulting, who offered California's Central Valley Project as a case study. Oregon State University Professor Michael Campana spoke to his favorite topic – groundwater. Specifically, he spoke about the depletion of groundwater in the West Texas portion of the Ogallala aquifer and suggested that “managed aquifer depletion” might be the way to approach this wicked problem. After mentioning some wicked problems of the Colorado River Basin and the Middle East, I highlighted the importance of inclusive and respectful processes when developing, evaluating, and implementing wicked water problem solution sets. While building relationships and establishing trust can be more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic, a silver lining is that virtual meetings and discussions can enable more participation by avoiding travel time and costs. Through the chat and facilitated discussion that followed panelists' remarks, many issues were brought forward. A particularly noteworthy comment written in the chat connects to Karletta Chief's remarks noted below: “I find it refreshing to hear the rights of Native Americans being openly and frankly discussed in these professional meetings. That is really a marked change from the past.”

The importance of process and communication was emphasized in the two-part panel on Water Justice Issues and Potential Solutions. Excellent speakers highlighted processes of working together to co-solve wicked issues of Tribal Nations (Navajo Nation), older urban water systems and infrastructure (Camden, N.J.), urban rivers (Anacostia River, Washington, DC), and at all scales (EPA). My Extension colleague Dr. Karletta Chief focused on the impacts of the Gold King Mine Spill, which had devastating societal, environmental, economic, and spiritual effects on the Navajo Nation. She described how overcoming distrust was aided by a community-driven partnership that involved UArizona personnel and team members from many other organizations. She noted how citizens and experts all came together to co-learn and co-solve, and she connected this experience to working with the Navajo Nation in response to COVID-19. Dr. Chief mentioned the involvement of more than 100 students in Gold King Mine Spill partnership efforts, more than half of whom were Native American.

Unfortunately, the first part of the water justice session overlapped with the session on International Policy to Address Climate Change. There, I was only able to listen to the remarks of UArizona Regents Professor Diana Liverman, lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on 1.5°C and member of the Earth Commission. In her remarks, she commented on differential vulnerabilities to the adverse effects of climate change and abilities to build resilience caused by societal and income disparities, noting a strong parallel of climate change and COVID-19. She also spoke to the importance of student engagement, including the youth climate movement.

The panel presentations and Q&A sessions of the other concurrent sessions all allowed for comments and questions to be entered in real-time throughout the sessions. This actually facilitated meaningful dialogue and sharing of perspectives throughout the AWRA conference. It was interesting to see how so much of the discussions focused on the crucial role of inclusive processes to identifying pathways to solutions to wicked problems. Participation is key to understanding the nature of our challenges so we can tackle the issues we face as a society. This is in keeping with the WRRC's mission, which is to tackle key water policy and management issues, empower informed decision-making, and enrich understanding through engagement, education, and applied research. We at the WRRC strive to improve and strengthen our processes for including more diverse voices and facilitating more learning opportunities and dialogue. We look forward to your participating with us!



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