



Reflections: Time to Retire the Water Buffalo Symbol?

by Sharon B. Megdal

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Your feedback is requested.

I am writing to invite your feedback on an important issue that came up at the Happy Hour discussion I hosted at the Water Resources Research Center's 2020 Annual Conference, *Water at the Crossroads: The Next 40 Years*. On June 18 and 19, 2020, the audience heard distinguished speakers and panelists address the history, current status, and future of Arizona water policy and management. We are grateful for the many individuals who joined us virtually. Keynote addresses, along with panel presentations and discussions, are available at our [conference website](#). In addition to the formal sessions, at the end of the first day, two of our sponsors and I hosted informal Happy Hour discussions. The conversation at the Happy Hour I hosted was quite lively and brought up a controversy that has prompted me to write this *Reflections* essay.

What was the controversial matter? Was it the potential transfer of water from the Colorado River communities to Central Arizona? Was it the role of the Central Arizona Groundwater Replenishment District? Both were prominently discussed by Governor Bruce Babbitt in his opening keynote address. No, the controversial matter relates to something else Mr. Babbitt mentioned multiple times, namely, his reference to the water buffalo. He noted the more than 400 water buffalos assembled for the conference at the very beginning of his remarks. In fact, he mentioned water buffalos three times, and other speakers referred to the water buffalo as well. Some participants in our Happy Hour discussion, however, did not welcome the association. They did not interpret it as a term of endearment, as I have thought of it. I recall responding positively when I was seemingly welcomed to the water buffalo herd back in 2004. At the

Arizona Town Hall held that autumn at the Grand Canyon, CAP General Manager Sid Wilson handed me a “Darned Proud Water Buffalo” pin. That pin is shown on the collar worn by the water buffalo pictured above. That wood water buffalo statue is one of my herd of four water buffalo figures, all of which were given to me over the years by a professional friend.

What associates a person with the water buffalo? In our Happy Hour discussion, some participants indicated that the water buffalo is not a pleasant animal; they did not consider being called a water buffalo a compliment. They were also put off by the sense that the water buffalos were members of an exclusive club. When searching online for something written connecting the water buffalo and water management in Arizona, I found the 2004 Annual Report of the Central Arizona Project. General Manager Sid Wilson’s letter to constituents opens: “The theme of Central Arizona Project’s 2004 annual report, Water Buffalos Undeterred, is kind of an in-joke among the water community. However, it is the kind of joke that should include the public. Since before Arizona was a state a small group of individuals has always been concerned with water issues. These people, who are virtually unknown to the general public, are responsible for what we are today.” A few paragraphs later, he writes: “Within the industry, those folks are called ‘Water Buffalos.’ There are a lot of theories about how the name evolved. Some say it’s because they were just a bunch of grumpy old men. Some say it’s because, like the water buffalo, these Water Buffalos plodded along and would not be deterred from accomplishing their goals.”

A central focus of Bruce Babbitt’s keynote address was the process for engaging in dialogue about difficult issues of water policy, such as the movement of water to Central Arizona from the Colorado River. The importance of process, particularly an inclusive process, came up many times during the conference. Process was vital for Arizona’s coming to agreement on the terms of our State’s participation in the Lower Colorado River Basin Drought Contingency Plan and will be critical to the renegotiation of the interim guidelines for sharing of Colorado River Shortage, both highlighted by U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Brenda Burman in her keynote address.

In this time of national dialogue on the importance of inclusivity and rejection of stereotypes, I suggest it is time to retire the water buffalo as a symbol of those who care about and are involved in water policy and management. The Water Buffalos of the past deserve great respect for what they accomplished; but as we remain aware of our water history, let’s think about a symbol that better captures the spirit of inclusivity, diversity, mutual respect, and general awareness of commonalities as well as differences in our perspectives. While it may be unnecessary or too early to agree upon a replacement symbol, I know we can agree that our gatherings for debate and dialogue, whether in-person or virtual, will include more than the water buffalo.

Please email your feedback, including your suggestion for a new symbol, to smegdal@arizona.edu.



Sharon B. Megdal, Ph.D.

Director, Water Resources Research Center
The University of Arizona