

## Preface

In the 1990s, I worked as a freelance writer and researcher specializing in water issues. There was a lot to write about, as problems like water scarcity, water pollution, and inadequate water services for billions of people were then (as now) giving rise to concerns about a global water crisis. In 1997, I put together a small book on water issues that was published by the Canadian Wildlife Federation and titled *Beneath the Surface: The State of Water in Canada*. The book was a snapshot of the contemporary health of aquatic ecosystems throughout Canada. On virtually every page, along with data on water quality, the hydrology of rivers, and the status of freshwater biota, there was information and comment about people: the legacy of activities such as mining on water quality and of land clearance on wetland ecosystems; the effects of large dams on the diet of First Nations peoples in the North; the impacts of agricultural and industrial practices on rivers; the influence of recreational fishing on the species composition of the Great Lakes. In a book devoted to “The State of Water in Canada,” I found it unavoidable to include a long chapter at the beginning that dealt with the history of human-water relations. The concluding chapter asked, “Are things getting better or worse?” and dealt largely with the water policy of the federal government.

I learned from producing that first book the difficulty of writing, talking, and even thinking about water without involving people in the story. The state of water always reflects, in one way or another, the state of society. And yet perhaps the greatest hydrological accomplishment in the modern world has been to construct an idea of water as something apart

from the broader social contexts in which it occurs. Water has been made known as an abstraction – as  $H_2O$ , the stuff that flows through the hydrologic cycle. This book provides a history of this abstraction and a critique of the kind of management thinking that flows from it.

Among the many people who have helped bring this book to light, there are several whom I wish to thank in particular: Graeme Wynn, the Nature | History | Society series editor at UBC Press, has been an inspiration and mentor as well as a source of suggestions and ideas along the way. Randy Schmidt, the acquisitions editor with whom I have worked throughout the project, has provided invaluable assistance and much-appreciated doses of humour when needed. Laraine Coates and the editing and production team at UBC Press have made it a pleasure to bring this book out while doing an excellent job of making it as presentable as possible. Although I cannot thank them personally, the comments of the three anonymous reviewers engaged by the Press have greatly improved the original manuscript. I am grateful to several colleagues for having reviewed parts of the text or otherwise having helped to improve it, especially Andrew Baldwin, Bruce Braun, Mike Brklacich, David Brooks, Sean Carey, Simon Dalby, Alex Loftus, Bill Nuttle, and Iain Wallace. I also wish to thank all those involved in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Carleton University (Ottawa) and the Department of Geography at Queen's University (Kingston) for providing me with a solid and convivial academic home in which to carry out my research and writing. I am also very pleased to acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (of Canada) (SSHRC) for supporting my study habits in recent years. My deepest thanks of all go to Deb Vuylsteke for her assistance and support throughout this project and to our children, James Jules and Samantha, for the same.