

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 H₂O, 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.

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