Embracing Watershed Politics
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Who gets to participate in decision making and how, on what scale and with what processes and through what organizational forms, and toward what ends and with what means of evaluation and change are fundamental components, indeed, and the focus of this book. They are fundamental questions of resource management, and they are the fundamental questions of politics.

Politics is not only “who gets what, when, and how” as it has been famously described (Lasswell 1958). It is also who decides who gets what, when, and how, and how we decide such things.

So much has been written about watersheds: their importance, their
complexity, their rediscovery as a focus of natural resource management and environmental protection. A fair amount has been written, too, about the management of watersheds and the kinds of institutional arrangements that would be best suited to the task. Much of that writing prescribes one or another organizational approach (such as an integrated watershed management agency or basin commission) or decision-making style (collaborative, consensus based, etc.) as essential or at least desirable to that task. Most watersheds, though, at least in the United States, have not conformed to such prescriptions and are instead governed and managed through complex, polycentric mixes of private and public bodies, of general-purpose and special district governments, of jurisdictions that lie within the watershed and jurisdictions that spill beyond it.

Our primary purpose in this book is not to criticize the institutional prescriptions that others have recommended but to try to explain the more complicated reality of the political watershed. Of course, we are not interested in providing merely a justification for existing institutions; we will have some prescriptions of our own along the way. We are, however, interested in combating a couple of viewpoints that surface from time to time in writing about watersheds—that one best way (meaning some form of comprehensive integrated management) exists for governing watersheds and that if we could just get rid of the politics we could manage the watershed so much better.

The one-best-way theme surfaces anew with each water era in the United States. Supporters of the National Resources Board and its river basin committees, created in 1934, argued that finally the United States would realize the value of integrated planning and comprehensive development of river basins, leaving behind the fragmented, haphazard approach practiced to that time (Derthick 1974). Two and a half decades later, river basin commissions were heralded as the best way to accomplish river basin management, replacing the fragmented, uncoordinated practices of the previous water era. As a 1960 report of the Senate Select Committee on National Water Resources explained: “For this new type of approach the term ‘comprehensive development’ is suggested. By it we mean the application of integrated multipurpose design, planning and management” (Senate Select Committee on National Water Resources 1960, Print #31:2). And, again, contemporary efforts at watershed planning and management through watershed partnerships claim that one of their prime advantages over earlier efforts is their
broad focus on managing all dimensions of a watershed (Sabatier et al. 2005).

In addition, the tone of frustration with political considerations is clear in some of the reflections of commentators (especially from the physical sciences) who have contributed their thoughts on natural resource systems generally or watersheds in particular. Watershed management efforts “face numerous obstacles, more social than hydrologic” (Kraft et al. 1999, 10), and their success often depends on “the degree of political commitment to the objectives by those who have authority to act. Regrettably, science can offer no help in this problem” (Pereira 1989, 54). Particularly in the United States, the governmental structure exhibits problems of “overlapping areal jurisdiction, dispersed functional responsibilities, and ineffective coordination . . . heightened by traditional interunit and intergovernmental tensions” (Nakamura and Born 1993, 812), with agencies and programs sometimes operating at cross-purposes (Behrman 1993, 11; U.S. EPA 1995, iii; Duncan 2001). Other water problems have remained unaddressed because they do not fit within established programs, so no agency or unit of government is charged with responding to them (Kraft et al. 1999). While they remain unaddressed, they grow worse.

These are important and valid criticisms by thoughtful and respected colleagues, and there is plenty of empirical support for them. The differences between political boundaries and watershed boundaries complicate many aspects of water resources management, and the existence of multiple governments and organizations with differing jurisdictions, powers, and portfolios creates opportunities for delayed and uncoordinated action. Left unanswered by this critique of the past and present, however, are three other questions that we think are important. First, how has watershed management (particularly in the United States) emerged despite this complex system, and what does it look like? Second, why do these polycentric and complicated arrangements exist—is there any logic to why people have constructed organizational and inter-organizational relationships in these ways, and if so what is it? Third, how can individuals working on watershed management under these circumstances better understand the institutional environment that surrounds them, why it is the way it is, and what to do? (In particular, we imagine the situation of a person who has assumed a position of responsibility for managing a watershed, whose education and experience heretofore have been primarily in science or engineering, and
who is looking for some practical help as well as a broader understanding.) Addressing these questions is a way of taking watershed politics seriously, of rightly viewing those political issues as “fundamental components of resource management.”

In this book, we also discuss political considerations as they affect watershed governance. Our approach as political scientists is somewhat different, at least in style, but in substance too. Instead of being stymied by political issues, we concentrate on them and the challenges they present. We do so for a variety of reasons.

For people to govern watersheds well requires that they make collective choices. People, organizations, interest groups, and governments, all of whom represent different interests, values, dreams, and aspirations, must collectively decide how to govern the shared resources and uses of watersheds. Collective choices are ultimately political choices. Thus, governing watersheds well requires embracing politics. Fortunately, watershed politics does not have to be blindly embraced; rather political science and, more broadly, political economy provide explanations, analyses, and prescriptions to assist watershed governors. The explanations and analyses, grounded in political theory, transaction costs, local public economies, and federalism, provide us with an understanding of why watershed governance is almost always going to involve many overlapping, sometimes cooperative, sometimes competitive governments, organizations, and associations. Such organizational and institutional complexity is likely even if cooperative and problem-solving orientations dominate among the participants in a watershed.

These literatures also provide prescriptions for good governance, which we will focus on and highlight. In our reading of the watershed literature we believe that political explanations and analyses are largely missing, and, consequently, so too are the prescriptions arising from such analyses. Finally, in engaging in a political economy analysis of watershed governance we hope to begin to reorient the policy debates surrounding watersheds from the search for the one best way to govern to the exploration of what forms of governance are possible in what types of situations and how institutional and organizational complexity can be better managed.1

We begin in Chapter 1 by constructing the physical and institutional setting within which watershed governance occurs in the United States. Watersheds are complex adaptive systems, and as such they exhibit certain
characteristics and dynamics that present particular challenges for their governance and use. Institutional arrangements, such as those in use in a watershed, can also be thought of as complex adaptive systems. Viewing both watersheds and institutions as complex adaptive systems provides opportunities not only to compare and contrast them but also to consider their relation to one another in a context where neither is privileged conceptually over the other.

In Chapter 2, we examine three eras of water management in the United States. Each era represents efforts at a nationwide scale to realize comprehensive integrated watershed management. In examining these eras we focus on the conceptions of the physical and institutional settings of watersheds, governance problems emerging and existing in watersheds, and means of addressing those problems. The fundamental political issues were similar across eras; however, how they were addressed differed, except in two important respects. The preferred mode of decision making was consensus, and plan implementation was voluntary. Such organizations are relatively weak and unable to realize integrated management. In the end, we argue that searching for the best way to manage a watershed is not as productive as examining how watershed management unfolds in practice and why.

In Chapter 3 we consider issues that are fundamental to politics. Those issues involve determining whose interests count in decision making, the strengths and limitations of different forms of decision making, and different institutional mechanisms for holding decision makers accountable. All of these issues require people to make choices that result in governing structures that are not always fair, that sometimes neglect important interests, and that are imperfectly accountable. These choices and their implications may sometimes be so difficult and divisive that people have trouble devising institutional arrangements that would allow them to better govern watersheds. We illustrate the difficult political choices that public officials and citizens must make in a case study of the Platte River watershed.

Beginning with Chapter 4, we construct a political economy analysis of watershed governance. In that chapter we assume that people are boundedly rational and make choices and take actions in a world of transaction costs. Bounded rationality and transaction costs place constraints on the types and structures of institutions and organizations that people can devise in order to achieve shared goals and desired outcomes. In order to cope with transaction costs, boundedly rational individuals construct multiple, overlapping
organizations that separately address limited goals and problems that would otherwise be impossible to achieve in a single, watershed-scale, general-purpose government. We illustrate our theoretical argument by applying it to a case study of the Columbia River Basin and the Northwest Power Planning Council.

In Chapter 5, we refine and further flesh out the analysis from Chapter 4 by focusing on values. In constructing governing arrangements, people must not only make trade-offs among transaction costs but also make trade-offs among efficiency, fairness, and responsiveness. Organizations that may be responsive to their members’ needs may not be very efficient in producing desired goods and services, for instance. We use the local public economies literature to explain how devising a diverse set of organizations with different missions and at different scales in a watershed may allow people to realize differing and sometimes conflicting values. The San Gabriel River watershed in Southern California provides us with the empirical example to apply our argument.

In Chapter 6, we turn to issues of scale and the relationships among governments and organizations at different levels extending from those that are wholly within the watershed to those that extend beyond the watershed. One of the sustained critiques of polycentric governance is that it is fragmented and uncoordinated. We use the literature on federalism to explore cross-scale linkages and relationships among governments, and how those relationships can be structured to support coordinated and complementary efforts on the one hand, and how they can dampen and discourage destructive competition among governments on the other. We use the Delaware River Basin Compact to further explore these issues.

In the concluding chapter, we review lessons from the case studies that were used in the previous chapters. In the similarities and differences among the cases, we find examples of the broader themes raised in the other chapters and in the book overall—the complex dynamics of water resources and human communities, the multiple scales and goals that are relevant to water resources management, the limited ability of people to address multiple scales and goals through integrated decision making and organizations, and the rationale underpinning the multi-organizational, polycentric, even federal style of governance seen in watersheds in the United States. Although it can seem a less congenial and rational place than the ideal integrated and scientifically managed watershed, the political watershed has the modest
virtues of being real and attainable. Embracing the political watershed is thus not so much a matter of ardor as of acceptance.

**Note**

1. We illustrate our arguments using several case studies of watershed management efforts. They include the Santa Ana and San Gabriel watersheds, the Platte River Basin, the Columbia River Basin, and the Delaware River Basin. We selected these case studies for a variety of reasons. First, although these watersheds are located across the United States from the northeast to the northwest and points in between, policy makers and citizens, no matter their location, were confronted with similar types of political challenges in governing watersheds. Second, the cases represent watersheds at a variety of scales, from those wholly within a state to those spanning numerous states. Third, the cases represent a variety of issues and challenges, from endangered species, to water quality, to drought management, to water supply, to habitat protection, and so on. Fourth, the cases represent a variety of institutional arrangements. The Platte River Cooperative Agreement is an administrative agreement among Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming, and the U.S. Department of the Interior to recover endangered species. The Northwest Power Planning Council was created by an act of Congress to integrate power planning and development and fish and wildlife protection on the Columbia River. The Delaware River Basin Compact was the first interstate river compact to include the federal government as an official member. And the two watersheds within California represent local entities assembling watershed governance from the ground up.
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