

High flows bring free services

Written by

John Bartholow

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Use it or lose it.

That's the common catchphrase for water in the West. So common in fact that when we have a great runoff like we had this year on the Poudre River, people bemoan that we "lost the water" because we didn't use it.

"Build Glade Reservoir," some say.

The truth is, if we carefully consider how the river applied that water, we really did use the water - and all for free!

So, what did the river do for us with all that water?

First, the river scrubbed itself clean of the accumulated gunk that had built up on the river's bottom - all that slippery, ugly greenish algae.

Now we can play and fish and appreciate a cleaner, more attractive, more enjoyable river flowing through our community. (And if we had a kayak-friendly play park on the river, we would have had a great asset for our town this year.)

Second, the river flushed huge loads of

sediment downstream, sediment that had built up in the river channel. Thus, the next true flood that comes along - and it will - will not rise as high and will do far less damage than if that sediment had been allowed to accumulate and harden in the channel.

Third, the river swept away additional wastes that people continually add to it.

True, dilution is not the ultimate solution to pollution. But we should still recognize and be grateful that the river provides a free water purification service - if we are smart enough to sustain that service.

Fourth, the river filled its side channels with water, nourishing the verdant cottonwoods and willows that give us (and the river) cooling shade along our biking and hiking trails and homes for many colorful birds and other wildlife.

So you see, lamenting the high flows that go downstream is really a glass-half-empty perspective. If you look at a river and see

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its water as only a commodity, it's easy to think "use or lose."

But if you look at a river and see the free services provided by that river, then you can appreciate the glass-half-full perspective of how the river uses these high flows to our great advantage.

The half glass is an apt analogy, by the way, because the Poudre River carries about half the water it once did by the time it reaches Fort Collins.

We have gotten tremendous benefits using that water to grow crops and to drink. But we have also paid a real price in services lost.

However, if Glade Reservoir were to take yet more water from our half-full river, all those remaining free services would be in jeopardy or greatly diminished. If we use the water that way, we lose the river. That would be use it and lose it.

That's not what I'd like to see happen, and I don't think that's what you would like for your children. So let's appreciate those high flows and keep those services coming.

John Bartholow is a board member of Save The Poudre: Poudre Waterkeeper.

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