

# IN DEFENSE OF WILD WATER: MONSOONS, RIVERS, & NAPALM DEATH

BY KYLE BOGGS



**W**ithout a doubt, monsoon season in northern Arizona is my favorite time of the year. I miss it already. The mornings are clear and sunny; the birds are loud and happy. These mornings are arguably the best time to spend outside, riding a bike, gardening, or just reading a book on your back porch.

Around eleven, huge white clouds gather around the Peaks, and slowly begin to consume the sky above the city. As the afternoon approaches, the clear blue fades, giving way to darker and darker shades of gray. The storm clouds in the distance look increasingly ominous as the top of the Peaks disappear entirely. As the wind picks up, the air sweetens and drops in temperature.

The first thunderclaps echo from behind the Peaks and around the city, telling bicyclists to take shelter, telling gardeners to put away their tools. If those who like to read outside are anything like me, they go inside, blast Mozart, Beethoven, or Chopin on their turntables, and continue reading next to a window.

One can literally see the rain drawing closer, in blue-gray streaks, illuminated by periodic flashes of lightning. Before Mozart completes his second full cadence, a clap of thunder — the loudest, most startling one yet — immediately sends dogs under beds and gazes back out windows. This is when you remember to unplug your computer and shut your windows. As you run around making the necessary precautions, the rain begins to tap dance on your roof. **Tap dancing immediately gives way to moshing — not Metallica moshing, but the kind of energy reserved for bands like Slayer or, dare I say it, Napalm Death.**

Someone once told me the weather in Flagstaff is the extreme version of the same weather everywhere else. When it rains, it pours. When it snows, it's a blizzard. When it's windy, you can't even be outside (I know a bicyclist who was so miffed at the wind that he threw his bike across three lanes of traffic ... I think of him and laugh every time I'm fighting the wind to get up a hill). But when it's beautiful outside, it is more beautiful than most places I've ever been.

When the rain stops, you hear the sirens, because for some reason, when it rains in Flagstaff, people lose all ability to operate their vehicles. But after the sirens, as trees and gutters on buildings sift the last few drops of water down to the soil below, there is a wonderful period of silence — as people slowly creep out

of their houses, as dogs slink out from beneath beds, and earthworms find their way back into the ground. The sun reappears, filtering through the dissipating clouds, and the air smells fresher and cleaner than any Irish Spring soap commercial could possibly depict.

The months leading up to the first monsoon rains are the hottest, driest months out of the year. The pine trees begin to lose their color, the underbrush browns, forest fires threaten every corner of the Southwest, and weeks can go by without seeing a cloud in the sky. Then, one day, you notice clouds. Every day, there are more and more of them, until one day it finally rains and everyone in town is in a great mood. Slowly the novelty wears off, but the rain doesn't stop for a month.

Instead of the blessing from which we originally regard the rain, many people see it as a nuisance, an inconvenience that won't let us play outside during the afternoon. While most people I know do love the rain, it's as if others slip into this **Nick Drake-laden depression** and blame it all on the rain that "just won't stop."

Everyone loves the first couple of storms but it seems like many, especially incoming NAU students, grow tired of the rain very quickly. **I, on the other hand, have learned never to complain when it rains in Arizona.** I have never lived anywhere where precipitation matters so obviously than northern Arizona.

After just a few weeks of rain, this whole area explodes with green; skunk, elk, deer, raccoon, fox, and many others rapidly populate the area. Neighborhood gardens begin to flourish, washes dry most of the year now flow with abundance. **Surely, if we lived in the real world, if we relied on the land for our food, our water, and our shelter, we would welcome the rains. In reality, rain in the desert means more of everything that is necessary for our lives.**

Instead we have created a world where we can function without owing our lives to the rain. Rather, we owe our lives to our jobs, to our economic systems. We get our water from the tap, our food from the grocery store. **In short we're privileged enough to feel inconvenienced by the rains.** That skunk, elk, deer, raccoon, fox and others run wildly around this area during monsoon season **like hipsters thrown free Modest Mouse tickets** while the rest of us groan, further illustrates this privilege.

Of the three necessities obtained through a healthy landbase (food, water, and shelter), our relationship with water might be the last one of these meaningful relationships to be soured by civilization. Our relationship with food has long been lost through the vast distances food travels, a complete lack of knowledge about where our food comes from, and our willingness to consume food that has been poisoned. As for our homes, they more obviously reflect the socio-economic backgrounds of those who occupy them rather than the land from which they are constructed. More recently, our relationship with water has become just as disconnected.

It wasn't too long ago we could drink the water naturally flowing around us in streams, creeks, and rivers without having to worry about getting sick. I have vivid memories of drinking from a stream in northern New Mexico with my Nana when I was a child. **A recent US Geological Survey concluded every single stream**

**in the continental United States contains some level of carcinogens.** When I was a kid, the only thing that crossed either of our minds while drinking water from a stream was the possibility of consuming beaver excrement. Today, we would obviously have much more to worry about.

Cities spend millions on cleansing efforts, yet today we are told not even to drink the water that comes out of our backyard hoses (and who doesn't love cold hose water on a hot day?) or from the tap. Instead, we are told to purchase water bottled in plastic.

**Even after Pepsi announced that its bottled water, Aquafina, actually comes straight from a public water source** — that's right, it's just tap water — we would still rather buy water bottled in plastic rather than address the toxification of our total environment. How did all this happen? When did we become so disconnected with such a basic necessity of life?

We are told there is a water shortage. To that I say, bullsh\*t. There is just as much water as there has always been. Sure, the locations of water change along with the climate, and the amount of people drinking the water is rising, but the water itself isn't disappearing. To frame the issue of water shortage in this way detracts from the real issue of irresponsible water usage.

When I mentioned my frustration on this issue to **Ellen Ryan, Flagstaff's Water Conservation Manager**, she agreed, though reiterated the very real problem of our water sources in terms of facing drought conditions. That we are, indeed, facing a drought further accentuates the importance of confronting irresponsible water usage.

Despite all the warnings about droughts and water scarcity, the vast majority of us who occupy the lands of the American Southwest do not confront dehydration on a daily basis (I do not include "everybody" in this because I don't want to minimize the very real threats faced by indigenous peoples in Northern Arizona, who are constantly defending access to their own water supplies and aquifers). **According to the World Bank, 80 countries now have water shortages threatening health and economies, while more than 1.1 billion people have no access to adequate drinking water.**

Rapid population growth is certainly an issue that can't be ignored, as people will continue to overpopulate areas where water is increasingly scarce. As population grows, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that industrial, agricultural, and individual water demands will escalate. If our current wars are fought over oil, the wars of the future will surely be waged over access to adequate quantities of drinkable water.

Population, however, is a secondary problem next to the issue of **consumption**. While our population has risen, water consumption has increased at a much faster pace. This reflects water usage alongside rising standards of living and the unsustainable nature of modern agriculture (since 1900, water use for agriculture has increased by more than 700%) and industry. It is far too easy to point the finger at population rather than to question our consumption habits within an unsustainable civilization.

Though stricter mandates and higher prices for water will surely be the reality in the near future, meaningful water conservation will require a shift in mindset. While this shift can be reflected in

the way individuals regard their own consumption of water, citizens should stand up and pressure the larger institutions that consume more water than individuals ever could.

When I asked Ms. Ryan who the biggest water consumer in Flagstaff is, she had the answer for me immediately. "NAU," she said, "is the main water user in this area." Of course, NAU, in comparison to Flagstaff, is its own little city, so the fact that it uses the most water should come as no surprise. Still, keep that in mind the next time its marketing department talks about all the exciting "green" changes the university is making.

**Also, just because a particular stretch of lawn utilizes reclaimed water doesn't necessarily make it a responsible choice.** I can think of many places — in the city, in residential areas, and at the university — where water is used to maintain lawns, lawns existing for no reason beyond aesthetic appeal. I've actually heard that grass is our country's biggest crop. And I know I'm not the only one who has cruised past a field of grass or a residential lawn during a thunderstorm and witnessed the sprinklers spitting water as it rains. Reclaimed water or not, this is irresponsible.

Ms. Ryan told me about something called a "rain sensor" which anyone could purchase that senses when it rains and shuts the sprinkler off automatically. She also told me about rain barrels one can purchase meant to collect roof water when it rains. This water can be used to water gardens and fill kiddie pools, among many other uses.

For those considering ripping out their lawns in favor of something more hydro-responsible, Ms. Ryan also suggested "xeriscape" for yards, which utilizes "low water use plants and natives" (there is a reason why sunflowers grow better than tomatoes!). A shift in mindset, whereby the true value of water in the desert is fully realized and savored, will require more than simply acting on a few tips, as vital as they are.

Indeed today it is hard to recognize the value inherent in regular access to clean water in the desert. Regarding water in the desert, **Edward Abbey** said, in *Beyond the Wall*, **"...nowhere is water so beautiful as in the desert, for nowhere is it so scarce. By definition, water, like a human being or a tree or a bird or a song, gains value by rarity, singularity, isolation ... In the desert each drop is precious."** This quote emphasizes both the need to recognize and appreciate the value of water in the desert, and calls for us to rekindle our relationship to it. It also helps to explain why I paid so much for that Dead Kennedys 7-inch that I never listen to.

Like a fresh lemon to a sailor lost at sea, we need to recognize the true value of our access to water in the desert and treat it accordingly. In truth, some things simply cannot be valued in monetary amounts. We've forgotten why we originally inhabited the areas of Arizona that we did. There is a reason why, for example, Cottonwood, Clarkdale, Jerome, and Prescott exist where they do. The answer: the **Verde River**. It's time we start re-identifying with rivers like the Verde that brought us here in the first place, and will sustain us in the future. But first we have to stop killing it.

At 7,000 feet, the land under and around Flagstaff has a crucial role to play regarding the health of the land in the valleys below. The Verde is one of the most important rivers in this area. It begins in tributaries that form among aspen, evergreens, and pine. As it travels down in elevation, it collects water from some of the most dramatic landscapes in the world: Oak Creek, Fossil Creek, West Clear Creek, and Beaver Creek have all contributed to the Verde for over 60 million years. The rivers deposit needed water and minerals throughout Arizona. During its 170-mile journey south, the heat and dry air

result in evaporation, which collects in clouds where it, again, rains in the high country. In this way, the network of rivers streams and creeks of Northern Arizona can rightfully be thought of as a vital circulatory system to the entire region. To many animals, it is more accurately an oasis, the life-blood of the entire region.

**The Verde River is one of "America's 10 most endangered" rivers.** It is currently being threatened by thirsty developments going up in Prescott and Prescott Valley that, if allowed, will strangle the river out of nearly 9,000 acre-feet of water per year. A US Geological Survey estimated that robbing this much water would dry up the initial 24 miles of The Verde, thus dramatically affecting the rest of this mighty river.

I recently talked to **Ron Harvey**, a teacher, artist, and local conservationist from Prescott who runs the "Save the Verde" myspace page ([myspace.com/theverderiver](http://myspace.com/theverderiver)) and does a lot of work with the fine folks at [savetheverde.org](http://savetheverde.org). I asked him what he thought the biggest threat to the Verde is.

"Us," he said, "plain and simple. We use too much water, and don't put it back where we found it. Right now, we have overdrawn our account, but aren't paying the penalty, and the bank is about to come knocking."

The Verde, of course, is not the only river being murdered in Arizona. In this state, right now anyway, we don't pay much for water, but that doesn't mean it flows through our faucets without cost. Once upon a time, the mighty Colorado River fed into the Pacific Ocean; not to long ago, this river reached the Mexican border.

Reiterating my thoughts (and Ed Abbey's) regarding the true value of the Verde and the importance of it to the entire region, Mr. Harvey went on, "It is also a truly rare jewel: a river in the desert. We run the risk of killing what we moved here for in the first place, and before many of us even knew it was there."

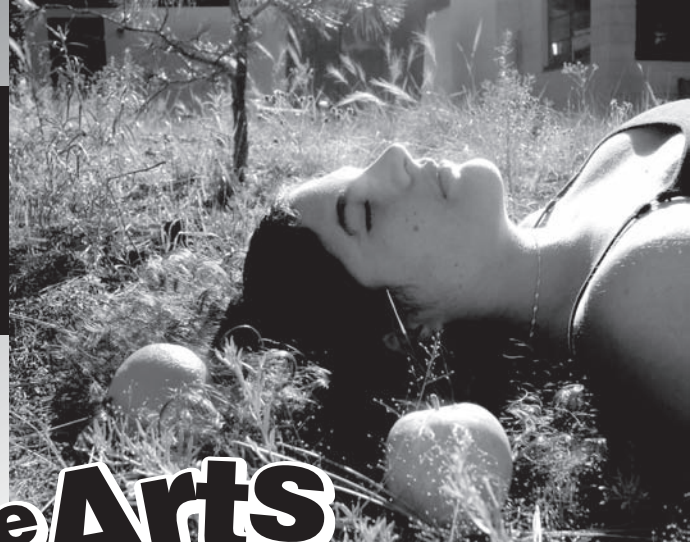
This made me think of Flagstaff's water sources as well. It always surprises me when people don't know where our own water comes from. As long as we turn on the faucet and clean water comes out, I suppose to many, the fact that much of it comes from Lake Mary is unimportant. **Still, if we begin to identify with the water sources that allow us to live here, we might learn to defend them.**

The more it rains during monsoon season, the healthier the landbase is. The more it snows during the winter, the more water we have to drink. What a novel idea! Our water doesn't come from the city; it doesn't come from the water company. Our water comes from the land, melting from snow that trickles down, collecting in streams, flowing into local lakes, seeping into the ground, where it is siphoned or pumped, filtered and funneled into our drinking glasses. If these waterways are not worth defending, I don't know what is.

*Ron Harvey is raffling off this beautiful painting of The Verde in the hopes that the money made will help save this vital river. Tickets are only \$5 and will be on sale until October 31<sup>st</sup>. Go to his myspace page for more information or, drop by **The Frame & I Art Gallery** at 229 West Gurley Street in downtown Prescott. If you don't live in Prescott but would like to purchase a ticket, contact Joanne at 928/772-8204 and she'll hook you up.*

**Kyle Boggs teaches English at NAU and rides his bike like there is no tomorrow. [undertheconcrete.org](http://undertheconcrete.org) [kyle@thenoise.us](mailto:kyle@thenoise.us)**

**Autumn Snooze, one of the many pieces of FALA student artwork featured at West of the Moon this month.**



## It's the Arts

CONTINUED FROM 20

Adams' nature paintings, his most recent work, shimmer with sunlight, and reveal the artist to be a master at creating incandescence on canvas.

Showing with Mr. Adams is Kingman painter **Wayne Campbell**, a realist who prefers to call himself a "micro-impressionist." Mr. Campbell says, "I try to make it still look like a painting, but you have to look real close before it starts to break up like the impressionists." Mr. Campbell started out as a nature and landscape artist, but like Mr. Adams, didn't want to be pigeonholed, and began work on the human form. He's been showing his figuratives since April, and says he's "been getting some pretty good responses." Last time he showed at Tanglewood, back in September for the Human Form exhibit, Campbell sold all his paintings in four hours, according to gallery director Joe Crownover — I'd say that's a pretty good response.

The two men will be present at the opening reception, 6-9PM during the Friday Art Walk, November 2.

### SARA GAMBLE AT CCC

Talent seems to flourish in the art rooms at Coconino Community College, which throws a fun and engaging show year after year. A generous supply of art forms will fill the **V. Philip Tullar Commons** of the Lonetree Campus during the CCC Fall Student Exhibit, November 26 through December 10, with the Artists' Reception to be Wednesday, November 28 at 4:30PM. You get photography, ceramics, drawing, oil painting, watercolor, and stained glass, all at one exhibit, which should gratify all your aesthetic needs.

But you don't have to wait to get your art fix at CCC. Right now on the north wall of the Commons you'll find the first-ever exhibit of nature photographer and Noise writer **Sara Gamble**, "Rivertimeline: An Exploration of the Little Colorado River Watershed." Ms. Gamble says she spent a fair amount of time wandering around the Little Colorado in the past two years, and came up with these black-and-white photos, which she calls "an experiential map of the key riparian system of northeast Arizona." Even if you've lived in Northern Arizona all your life, you've probably never seen this part of your own backyard.

### NATIVE TREASURES AT DEL RIO

If you think you know Native American art, check out the "Native Treasures" exhibit at the Del Rio Gallery and put your assumptions to the test. "The Native scene is contemporary," Del Rio's **Ruth Ann Border** says, "It's about evolving forms."

An ambitious array of artists will be on display, including the kinetic jewelry designs of Hopi neo-traditionalist **Michael Kabotie**, the streamlined silverwork of **Boyd Tsosie**, the modernist paintings of **Juane Quick-To-See-Smith** and a host of others, approaching traditional ways with fresh thinking.

The show will be open from November 2 to December 2, so catch it while it's here.

### ALL ELEMENTAL AFTER ALL

Fresh thinking about traditional forms is what's going on in the "It's Elemental" exhibit running from November 20 through December 20 at the **Coconino Center for the Arts**. For an eighth year, artisans from Coconino, Navajo and Yavapai counties submit works ranging from furniture to jewelry, made with materials artisans have been using for centuries: wood, clay, gourds, fiber, metal and glass. The only thing contemporary is the thought put into it.

The exhibit will feature a collaborative piece made by six artisans, each one contributing a different medium to the piece. Student artisans from Northern Arizona University and Coconino Community College are also submitting entries this year, and will be featured separately in an additional exhibit, "Foundations." The opening reception is **Saturday, November 17** at 6pm, and will also feature a sale of hand-made holiday ornaments and a concert by classical guitar whiz **Tom Sheeley**.

### FALA AT WEST OF THE MOON

Add the young scholars of the Flagstaff Arts & Leadership Academy to the growing list of art students who have impressive work on display this month. FALA's 3<sup>rd</sup> annual exhibit at **West of the Moon Gallery** in downtown Flagstaff, opens on the Friday Art Walk, November 2 from 6-9PM. Inspired works of painting and photography from the FALA Advanced Placement Studio will be on display, lighting provided by the beaming of proud parents.

**John Abrahamsen is a radio personality, social worker, and poet who claims Flagstaff as home. [art@thenoise.us](mailto:art@thenoise.us)**