

Northwest dam removals — obstacles and solutions

As someone who frequently hiked the Olympic Mountains in my youth, I remember well the acrimonious debates over whether to take down the Elwha River dams. Not that long ago, dam removal was considered a radical proposition by many, and here in the Pacific Northwest, we grew up priding ourselves on the “clean” power of hydroelectricity — even celebrating it with the songs of Woody Guthrie.

In addition to power, dams have provided irrigation, flood control, trade opportunities and recreational assets. This impressive suite of benefits demonstrated progress to the denizens of the 20th century.

But times and circumstances change and, as Peter Brewitt demonstrates in his new book, “Same River Twice,” in this century it’s become increasingly apparent that dams also have serious and far-ranging environmental costs. Calls for their removal, and river restoration, have become com-

THIS WEEK’S BOOK

Same River Twice

By Peter Brewitt

OSU Press

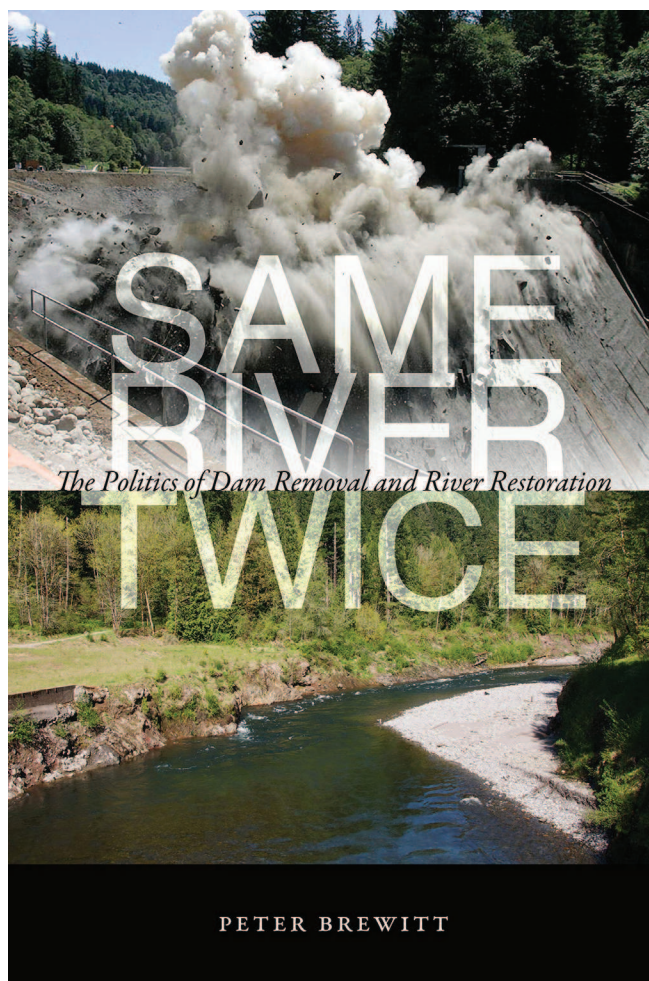
288 pp

\$24.95

mensurately urgent.

You may be surprised to learn that the river-rich West Coast — Washington, Oregon and California — accounts for only four percent of our nation’s dams — but 11 percent of the dam removals that have taken place in the United States since the turn of the century have happened in these three states.

Brewitt provides three case studies of removal projects — the takedown of the Elwha and Glines Canyon Dams along the Elwha River; the Savage Rapids Dam, just upstream from Grants Pass on the Rogue River; and the Marmot Dam on the Sandy River, which flows from Mount Hood into the



Columbia River.
Each case is unique,

but Brewitt also teases out
some of the factors these

situations shared — both in the obstacles and objections to dam removal, and in the solutions that eventually played out.

A key concern raised by members of the public in each of these cases was the removal of the impounded water behind the dams, which had served as recreational lakes for humans and homes for aquatic birds.

On the other hand, tribes and environmentalists made the case for freeing the rivers in order to restore their viability not only as fish runs but as crucial components of a healthy ecosystem overall.

Father Time played a role in all of this too. Over the decades, maintenance of the aging dams’ infrastructure became increasingly expensive, and as new sources of efficient energy came online, and simpler irrigation technologies improved, some of the economic arguments for dam preservation became less persuasive.

But change is nigh impossible if citizens don’t

feel that their concerns are being heard and addressed. Resistance to dam take-downs ranged from letter-writing campaigns and candlelight vigils to effigy-burning and political withholding of funds.

Patient community engagement and broad coalition building proved to be key in moving forward.

Scrupulously researched — with over 1500 footnotes and nearly 150 personal interviews — “Same River Twice” is an invaluable book about political maneuvering and policymaking.

And yet, Brewitt presents this material in an accessible style — with an eye for the funny detail, and an ear for the pungent quote.

This book should suit the layperson as well as the academic.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com

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