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"Who Owns Water"  
Hydrophiles Symposium Presentation and Panel Review

David Hanson's weave of science, culture, public policy, and personal vindication provided the viewer an intricate tapestry to consider. His film was based on the month long 543 mile journey in a canoe he undertook with his brother Michael to video document the Chattahoochee, Flint, and Apalachicola Rivers in Georgia, Alabama, and Florida, and the people who live along them. The impetus for his journey in 2009 was the fomenting debate that has since risen to a lawsuit in the Supreme Court between Georgia and Florida. Hanson approached locals in various locations to hear their takes on the water issues, and allowed them to speak for themselves in the context of the film. The feeling was authentic and open to all sides of the issue.

I had the opportunity to sit at the table with Kathleen Rugel of the University of Georgia's Ecological Research Center. She is a groundwater specialist and was featured in the film offering her thoughts on the groundwater issues confronting the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) Watershed. She shared that a stakeholder group had formed crossing the boundaries of the three states, and referred to itself as the ACF Stakeholders. They had attempted to enact policy changes through common consent and power of voice and numbers across state lines. However, as already mentioned, Florida grew impatient with the present circumstances and filed suit in the Supreme Court to protect its Apalachicola Bay oysters among other resources. In doing so a gag order was issued on all interstate discussion and scientific information sharing. This shut down the common consent resolution dreams of the AFC Stakeholders for the present.

I found most intriguing the vehemence of the local people about their opinion and "their river water". Certainly we all feel partial about the goods that flow through our pipes and into our water cup, but the emotions conveyed on all sides were stout, impassioned, stump speeches, generally accompanied by a threat to any who disagreed. No one was halfway. Kathleen Rugel expressed a

similar sentiment, and conveyed that she still couldn't watch the movie without becoming emotional, just as a mother wistfully going through old family photos. She shared that she had done her graduate research on a ranch on the Flint, and that all of the local farmers there didn't just feel entitled to the water that ran through their land, but they owned it and couldn't be persuaded to consider any other way to think of it. In fact, David Hanson concludes his documentary by asserting the same view, we don't share water, we own it. All of us together.

That firm determination to get it or fight to the death about it felt very cultural and distant to me here in Oregon. Perhaps it is because California isn't trying to drain the Willamette with a pipeline. Be that as it may, there was a distinct desperation about each of those interviewed. An impassioned need to be heard, validated and recognized as a viable player in the grand sum total of the situation. Again, Kathleen Rugel offered insight into this difference in temperament. She said simply, "Many people keep going around about 'choices', but that's a false reality. There aren't choices. These people don't have a choice about their use of the water. It is their life. And it is the only way they know and can live."

The stakeholders in this ACF mess are all up against a wall. The oysters in the Bay are dying off, and the oyster farmers aren't just losing money, but they are being forced to leave generational livelihoods. The peanut farmers in Georgia have farmed the land for over a hundred years. And when your agricultural insurance won't write you a policy unless you "drought proof" your crops by overwatering what choice do you have? The power plant workers in Alabama who see the potential for more jobs and more resources if they could just get a "fair" allocation of the river water. And not just padding pocketbooks, but jobs that make the difference between poverty or not. The citizens of the major cities on the waterways, including and especially Atlanta, who provide the economic grease that keep the wheels turning. The river dwellers who very literally depend on the river for everything, including their daily meal. Nothing is easy.

All of the voices pleading for recognition and validation are provocative. All carry lifestyles, stories, and needs that will be compromised to serious detriment if ignored and overlooked. I doubt a good hearing in the Supreme Court could ever resolve this mess. That's like saying you can just pull a string and the hopelessly tangled, fishing line knot will come loose. Only this knot is over 543 miles long and carries the hopes and dreams of over 7 million people. We may have to work a little harder at this than to simply throw it in the lap of a few overworked judges. This process is destined to continue to repeat itself until that common consent group can hammer out a compact that holds weight and moves forward. Until then, a lot of money and angry words will continue to fly in all directions, and the little people will continue to watch their lifeblood, the river and its water, run through their hands.