

# Big River In Peril

By David Steinberg / Journal Staff Writer on Sun, Aug 28, 2011

Adriel Heisey is the bird of the subtitle of “The Rio Grande: An Eagle’s View.”

In an ultralight plane and with camera, Heisey presents magnificent photographs of the Rio Grande in this large-format book that inspires river preservation and conservation.

Heisey, a veteran New Mexico-based aerial photographer, shot the Big River from its headwaters in mountainous southwestern Colorado as it dips through the heart of New Mexico, runs along as an international border and some 1,900 miles later empties into the Gulf of Mexico.

The book, a 10-year project, endorses a seemingly simple concept: The Rio Grande needs water to be a river, to be of ecological and economic value. Otherwise it will dry up.

Essays and a foreword present evidence that the river should have the necessary water for the flora and fauna and for such water-intensive human activities as agriculture and urban life. According to John Horning’s essay that will require having a healthy river and sharing its water.

“To exist in harmony with a living Rio Grande is to recognize the reality that water is a finite resource and that endless growth cannot be sustained,” writes Horning, WildEarth Guardians’ executive director.

Perhaps his essay’s most significant point is that the many dams on the main waterway and on its tributaries are the greatest threat to the Rio Grande’s ecology, more threatening than pollution, groundwater pumping, wetland filling and levees.

Robert Redford says in the book’s foreword that Heisey’s photos “offer the force

of revelation. ... this portrait gives the river – seen as a whole – a monumental new scale.” It does indeed.

But it is author Steve McDowell’s essay, “Toward a Long-Running River,” that gives the reader a depth of understanding of the Rio Grande’s hydrology and of cultural/political perspectives in human history.

Even the briefest of comments are worth remembering. On a page that shows a channelized Rio Grande and traces of the river near Fort Quitman, Texas, a single paragraph reveals a river in need: “At the lower end of the El Paso/Juarez valleys, a 200-mile reach of the river is choked off by invasive tamarisks and, in places, has no identifiable channel. What water remains after irrigating a million acres is a toxic soup. Here the Rio Grande becomes a forgotten river, overlooked by the Rio Grande Compact and international treaties.”

David Steinberg is the Journal’s Books editor and an Arts writer.

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