

## Miller: On World Water Day, Will San Antonio Commit to Its Future?

22 March 2011  
Char Miller

CLAREMONT, March 22 - Today is World Water Day, a U.N.-sponsored event that is an ideal time for communities to strategize about their future water needs.

For San Antonio (and South Texas), this year's theme--Water for Cities: Responding to the Urban Challenge--could not be more appropriate. Globally and locally, rapid urbanization is intensifying pressure on the capacity of metropolitan regions to insure all people's access to potable water.

Compared to mega-cities such as Lagos or Mumbai, San Antonio seems to be in ok shape. Few express disquiet that a city whose population has doubled since the 1980s, and is still absorbing more water-hungry souls, might be in jeopardy. As for its continued dependence on what is essentially a single source of water, the Edwards Aquifer, how bad can that be?

This same unworried tone is amplified in Bruce Davidson's recent (*San Antonio Express-News*) column opposing the proposed Uvalde pipeline: in urging local legislators to reject the project because it raises too much "territorial angst," and by suggesting that the "paper transfer" of water from the Hill Country counties is working, he strikes a nonchalant pose.

That posture has a long history, and has been responsible for the city's current water-supply difficulties.

During the crushing 1950s drought, for instance, San Antonio tried to purchase a share of Canyon Lake's waters, a proactive move the courts rejected. 20 years later when the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority offered to sell the city that same water, it turned it down. Short-term thinking had won out over long-term planning.

For the next 30 years, as the population surged, local leaders happily underwrote suburban sprawl across the expanding northern tier but did nothing to protect the Edwards Aquifer's vital recharge zones. The community has been paying for their foolishness ever since.

The cost escalated in the early 1990s: heavy pumping of the Edwards Aquifer threatened the survival of the Fountain Darter, among other subterranean species. In time-honored fashion, neither the city nor the San Antonio Water System (SAWS) was particularly concerned. Grassroots activists were, however and in May 1991 the Sierra Club filed suit in federal court. Two years later, Judge Lucius Bunton ruled in the Sierra Club's favor, forcing San Antonio, SAWS, and the state to heed federal regulations by changing the aquifer's management.

Even as these entities have scrambled to get into compliance over the past two decades, what has not changed is the belief that things only happen to San Antonio. The city does not act for itself but waits for others to act for it. So now it awaits the decision of the Edwards Aquifer Recovery Implementation Program to determine its fate.

Although the *Express-News* doesn't seem too concerned about this situation, it should be. San Antonio will not be allowed to pump paper water in violation of federal law, specifically the Endangered Species Act. So it will have to locate, and pay for, new sources of real water.

It ought to have realized this would happen twenty years ago, and then adopted the proactive behavior of its peers across the American west. Say what you will about Denver, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas--

and this is much to critique in their actions--but they locked in their future water supplies by thinking of the future as something best managed in the present. They did not shy away from "territorial angst" but addressed it through strategic action and cash outlays.

This kind of forward-looking commitment has been (largely) absent in San Antonio's water history. Perhaps World Water Day will be a turning point when the Alamo City demands of itself a more active engagement with its most pressing problem.

What it can no longer do is bury its head in the sand, believing that's the best way to locate water.

*Char Miller directs the environmental analysis program at Pomona College, is author of *Deep in the Heart of San Antonio*, and recently edited *Cities and Nature in the American West* and *Water in the 21st-Century West*.*

© Copyright of the Rio Grande Guardian, [www.riograndeguardian.com](http://www.riograndeguardian.com). Publisher: Steve Taylor. All rights reserved.