

Gleeson, George W., "The Return of a River: The Willamette River, Oregon." N.p.: n.p., 1972
(Reviewed by Michael O'Leary)

This report, funded through the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of the Interior, catalogs and analyzes the history of pollution and remediation in the Willamette River from the mid 1920s through the early 1970s. Written by George Gleeson, an Emeritus Dean of OSU's College of Engineering, it presents hard scientific data and includes both contextualizing and conclusive commentary as well. The text weighs in at close to 100 pages, including text, data sets, graphs, photographs, notes and bibliographic references.

The report reviews the historical records of pollution indicators like biochemical oxygen demand, dissolved oxygen rate, coliform bacteria count, water temperature, rate of river flow, and the percentage of dissolved solids, yet it also makes a number of claims as to human impacts on water quality that lack the same scientific rigor.

Critique

Gleeson, continuing in the tradition that he began 36 years previously in the Oregon State Engineering Experiment Station Bulletin Series, uses his position as a scientist to present scientific data and wrap it up in an argument for the unregulated development of the river.

In this report from 1972 Gleeson trumpets the successes of the river's clean-up, proclaiming "The Willamette has been returned to the people of Oregon" (87) and that it is once more "an asset to the state of Oregon" (ii.) More specifically he avowed that the "recreational potential of the Willamette has been re-established" (87) and that "provisions have been made for both upstream and downstream passage of fish" (87.)

Even more frightening than his view of the past was his view of the future. Gleeson cheerfully announced that 52 dams were planned along the river in the next 15 years, with just 17 of them planned adjacent to existing projects while no less than 35 of the new dams being slated for new stretches of the rivers watershed (84.) Gleeson claimed that an additional 35 dams would be added along the river during the following 15 years, adding up to a grand total of 87 dams over 50 years. Gleeson hailed the benefit of dilution to the problem of pollution, and saw "no alternative for assuring water quality" in the river.

Knowing now, as we do, that since the time of Gleeson's reassurances, that the EPA has listed the Willamette's Portland Harbor as a Superfund site, that multiple species of native fish on the river have been placed on the Endangered Species List, that mercury poisoning has contaminated the fish in the Willamette from its confluence up to its headwaters on the Coast Fork, and so forth, Gleeson's breathless congratulations seem a more than just a bit exaggerated. Indeed, they're biased. Viewed in context with Gleeson's pro-industry reports from 1972 and from 1936, his analysis stands out in contrast to those of his fellow OSU researchers from as far back as 1945, 1930, and even 1929. The other researchers from

Gleeson's day raised higher standards, shouted more alarm, and were more direct in their calls for increased regulation to help save the Willamette ecosystem. Gleeson was making a choice to use his position as a scientist and his standing as an academic to encourage the belief that industry and regulators were already doing what was right and to quiet the continuing calls for environmental action.

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