

Damming Saskatchewan: creating water landscapes in western Canada

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Introduction and Aims

In the era of major hydropower construction across Canada in the mid-twentieth century, Saskatchewan had a problem. It is, owing to its ecological division, a lop-sided province. While the majority of its population sits in the prairie south, the best potential water-power is locked in the Canadian Shield, spread across the north. Any hydropower development on the most logical rivers, such as the mighty falls and roar of the Churchill, would be too far – and too expensive – to draw the power south to the developing industries, farms, and towns.

Tourism was equally lop-sided. The few prairie parks that existed by the mid-twentieth century were small oases close to water, such as Last Mountain Lake north of Regina, or the chain of Calling Lakes in the Qu'Appelle Valley. Strung throughout the arid plains, these lakes, while popular, often suffered. Drought and low rainfall caused shorelines to recede, and a stagnant lake could skim over with rash-producing algal scum. The only national park in Saskatchewan at the time, Prince Albert National Park north of Prince Albert, sat brooding in the boreal forest. Its lakes and waterways, while enticing, were too far for day-tripping from Regina, Moose Jaw, or even Saskatoon.

With the Great Depression and 'dirty thirties' firmly in the rear view mirror, Saskatchewan and Canada set out to not only recreate the prairie, but to recreate it as a tourism destination. Provincial and federal government engineers and policymakers used the need for recreation sites as one point of leverage in pursuit of massive water engineering projects. The largest scheme was the South Saskatchewan River Project, aiming to dam the South Saskatchewan River and create a large reservoir.

This short paper will explore the narrative of lake scarcity and aridity as one thrust in the rush to build dams in southern Saskatchewan in the post-Second World War era. Prairie tourism, tied to water landscapes, needed more water: creating reservoirs fit the bill. The paper focuses on the *Report of the Royal Commission on the South Saskatchewan River Project*, published in 1952. It connects massive environmental projects with active tourism development, looking in particular at the role of *causal stories* in shaping the way a project is perceived.

Influence of Causal Stories on Policy

The concept of 'causal stories,' originally proposed by Deborah Stone in policy analysis,¹ has found traction in a number of research dimensions. As she noted, "causal stories move situations intellectually from the realm of fate to the realm of human agency." Stone's original work restricted causal stories to human action, whereas causation from the natural world or natural phenomenon was 'accidental.' Stone was interested in how a particular difficulty becomes transformed into a political problem – one that is

¹ D.A. Stone, "Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas." *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 104 (2) 1989: 281-300.

solvable, or at least “amenable to human intervention.” The point is to tell a story in a particular way, so that it influences policy.²

From human health to children’s reading and comprehension to environmental and humanitarian studies, there is a growing understanding that how a story is framed and told shapes how people respond. In policy studies, causal stories are primarily linked to policy formation. Examples include Dayna Scott’s work connecting causal stories with environmental justice, and Carrie Booth Walling on causal stories and humanitarian intervention.³ Building slightly away from Stone, causal stories now often include climatic events within the natural world, in large part because of their impact on human life and their now-assumed roots in climate change, a human-created phenomenon. Catastrophic events, such as Hurricane Katrina or other major events, are rich ground to investigate the importance of causal stories.⁴ Major climatic events are *focusing events* which can open ‘policy windows,’ giving policymakers and governments a conducive atmosphere for implementing strategic or overt major policy change. A causal story can be used to harness the energy of an event, using it as the thread to stitch change into the future.⁵

Peter Jacques and David Ostergren explored the importance of causal stories when researching policy formation related to protected spaces. In their study of the movement to apply ‘wilderness’ designation for the Grand Canyon, USA during the 1970s, they found that those opposed to the designation shaped their causal story around sociopolitical *use* of the Grand Canyon (rather than protection), in particular extensive motorcraft access to the Colorado River – uses not allowed by the Wilderness Act. In setting the story as one of use, enjoyment, exploration and safety, those opposed to wilderness designation received far more traction. Conflict, values, and power became intertwined. The causal stories put forward by each side offered, Jacques and Ostergren note, “preferences and preclusions about what kind of relationship the public should have with the Grand Canyon.”⁶

Within the larger field of environmental history, the act of politically ‘creating’ or setting aside a space as a recreational area, park, or wilderness site has been well-served. There are issues around inclusion and exclusion, the meaning of wilderness, power, and class, among many others, that should be considered. There is an equally strong environmental history tradition dealing with dams and dam-making and similar massive environmental projects. Again, it is critical to consider politics, business, environmental change, unequal power relations, forced removal, and legacy.

² Stone, p. 281-282.

³ Dayna Scott, “Constructing Causal Narratives: Organizing for Environmental Justice.” *Conference Papers – Law and Society* 2007 Annual Meeting; Carrie Walling Booth, “Causal Stories and Humanitarian Intervention.” *Conference Papers – International Studies Association* 2006 Annual Meeting, 1-47.

⁴ See, for example, Vincent Gawronski, “Constructing Causal Stories: The 2005 Hurricane Katrina Disaster.” *Conference Papers – Midwestern Political Science Association*. 2006 Annual Meeting; Thomas Croom, Cherie Maestas, and Lonna Atkeson, “Attribution and Policy Preference Formation Following Disaster: Preferences for Centralization after Hurricane Katrina.” *Conference Papers – Southern Political Science Association*. 2010 Annual Meeting; Thomas Berkland, “Learning From Disaster: Policy Change after Catastrophic Events.” *Conference Papers – Midwestern Political Science Association*. 2004 Annual Meeting, Chicago, Ill.

⁵ For a Canadian political perspective on the importance of causal stories, see Patrick Wilson, “Deficit Reduction as causal story: Strategic politics and welfare state retrenchment.” *Social Science Journal* Vol. 37 (1) 2000: 97-113.

⁶ Peter Jacques and David Ostergren, “The End of Wilderness: Conflict and Defeat of Wilderness in the Grand Canyon.” *Review of Policy Research* Vol. 23 (2) 2006: 573-587.

There is less consideration, within environmental history, of the connections between these two research themes: the importance of causal stories and environmental focusing events on the formation of recreational areas. The idea of creating recreational space belongs more firmly in municipal planning, not large-scale environmental projects. But there is ample space to consider the unique role of recreational space and subsequent tourism as one of the critical factors supporting large-scale environmental projects such as dams.

Picking up on Jacques and Ostergren, they note a distinct and set preclusion to how people interact with the Grand Canyon – a preconceived notion of what the landscape looks like, and what people can and should do there. Preclusions are also often formed about southern Saskatchewan. The concept of ‘prairie’ evokes a stereotypical image of flat, treeless fields of grain. It is a landscape of work, of farming and ranching, big skies and an overwhelming amount of space. It is not a landscape known as a recreational space. The prairie image, often denoted as boring and uninviting, is a significant component in causal stories related to Saskatchewan tourism. Capitalizing on this landscape is difficult; instead, provincial tourism literature often markets against this image.⁷

In addition to the vastness of the prairie landscape, the underlying climatic story in southern Saskatchewan is aridity. Aridity, simply defined, happens when evaporation exceeds precipitation on a regular basis. The landscape, particularly in the ‘Palliser’s Triangle’ region of southwestern Saskatchewan and southeastern Alberta, is arid – dry, parched, lacking in moisture. Major Duncan Stewart, writing in 1938, called the region ‘The Canadian Desert.’⁸ Aridity hindered development and agriculture in Palliser’s Triangle, and certainly stunted tourism.

Aridity became actualized, tangible in the prairie landscape during the multi-decadal drought of southern Saskatchewan and Alberta, which some researchers now recognize stretched from 1914-1939.⁹ The drought, which soon wore the moniker of the ‘dirty thirties’ to describe both the environmental and social effects concentrated on that dismal decade, should be considered an environmental focusing event. The drought and economic depression in western Canada, and in particular in Saskatchewan, was a local, provincial, and federal crisis unparalleled in Canadian history before or since. Tens of thousands of people found their lives exploded into jetsam, displaced, forced onto relief, nearing starvation.

The dirty thirties opened a policy window that did not close immediately, once the drought and depression receded. Instead, the event became an embedded causal story that fed into numerous political and social changes. For example, historians recognize the impact of the dirty thirties in the strength of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) political victory in 1944, the creation of Medicare in 1962, and new federal policy changes such as unemployment insurance, crop insurance, and mother’s allowances.

The dual-scourge of drought and dust storms was a distinctly prairie phenomenon. The dirty thirties as a focussing event threw the two aspects of the landscape – prairie and aridity – inextricably bound in the subsequent causal story. Drought and aridity were transformed from an event to a problem amenable to

⁷ Merle Massie, *Forest Prairie Edge*.

⁸ Major Duncan Stuart, K.C. *The Canadian Desert: An Attempt to Stay the Loss of the West*. (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1938).

⁹ See, for example, *Happyland*.

human solution. Even as the decade faded into the past, the strength of prairie drought as a causal story remained and was used as a political tool to sway opinion in support of the call to dam the Saskatchewan.

Origins of Dams in Saskatchewan

In 1858, while surveying what was then Rupert's Land, Henry Youle Hind of the Assinboine and Saskatchewan Expedition looked down and across the broad valley of the South Saskatchewan River. In his mind's eye, and recorded in his Report, Hind saw a dam: "85 feet high, and 600 to 800 yards long." This dam, built for navigation, would (Hind thought) "send its waters down the Qu'Appelle valley, thence down the Assinboine past Fort Garry, and thus establish a splendid and probably uninterrupted navigation, for steamers of large size, for a distance exceeding six hundred miles."¹⁰

While Hind's assessment spoke only to transportation, the seed was nonetheless planted to consider the possibility of damming the Saskatchewan River. But dam it for what purpose? As railways moved west, water transport rapidly declined across the prairie region. As industrialism moved west, water as a site of power captured the public imagination – but the first effort in this direction stumbled. There was a short-lived, but ultimately disastrous initiative in Prince Albert to harness the power at La Colle Falls (a series of rapids just east of Prince Albert) around 1910. The project, financed by the city of Prince Albert, was based on reports predicting almost 10,000 HP of cheap electrical energy for the city, enough to entice both consumers and industrial manufacturers. But the engineers forgot to factor in the low winter water flow; costs soared and in the end, the banks stopped the loans and construction halted. The venture almost bankrupted Prince Albert, swallowing it in a financial quagmire for fifty years.¹¹

By the 1920s, as electricity for personal, industrial, and social purposes became woven through the fabric of society, both provincial and federal governments looked at water primarily as a source of power. The 1927 Report of Saskatchewan Power Resources Commission reported on the "economic practicability of generating power at central power plants and water power sites in the province."¹² But the report was not in favour of building new power plants: "the water powers in the far north of the province are too distant to be of immediate interest."¹³ The only power available "within reasonable reach of the settled area" was below the Forks of the Saskatchewan River, east of the city of Prince Albert, towards Manitoba, past the original site of La Colle Falls. Proximity, though, was not enough. Fixed capital costs to develop water power were too expensive when other potential power sources, such as coal to run steam turbines, were readily available.¹⁴

Following the 1927 report, the province of Saskatchewan continued to investigate potential hydropower sites along the Saskatchewan River, hoping against hope that economics and need would somehow put

¹⁰ Quoted in *South Saskatchewan River Report of the Royal Commission on the South Saskatchewan River Project* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1952), p. vii.

¹¹ For a history of the La Colle Falls project, see Tyler Clark, "La Colle Falls: historical blunder or missed opportunity?" in *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, 10 August 2012. See <http://www.paherald.sk.ca/Local/News/2012-08-10/article-3050476/La-Colle-Falls%3A-Historical-blunder-or-missed-opportunity/1> accessed 15 July 2013. See also Prince Albert Board of Trade, "Prince Albert: Europe's Easiest Way," 1910. For a fictionalized version, see John Beames, *Gateway*.

¹² *Report of Saskatchewan Power Resources Commission* (Regina: King's Printer, 1928), p. 3.

¹³ *Report of Saskatchewan Power Resources Commission*, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 6, 29.

these projects on a potentially profitable footing. But the Great Depression put such hopes in a dusty back drawer. The provincial Bureau of Publications attempted to counteract the devastating public face of the Great Depression, where Saskatchewan – more than any other place in North America – tumbled to its knees under the raging dust storms. Producing a publication called *Saskatchewan: A Few Facts*, the pamphlet aimed to dispel myths about the province. Written for tourists and immigrants, the bulletin gave an outline of history, ecology, people, governance, and society, skating delicately over Depression conditions and picking its statistics carefully. The first edition of these pamphlets was published in 1935, containing just sixteen pages. The second edition, published in 1938, was a fulsome expansion to forty-eight pages and a run of 20,000 copies. This run, exhausted, led to the third edition, published in 1940, a booklet of eighty pages.¹⁵

Both the 1938 and 1940 editions open, on the inside fly, with tourist information. Tourists were encouraged to write to the Bureau to request information on suggested routes, maps, mileage schedules, border crossings, and “any other information the Bureau thinks will be valuable to the Tourist.”¹⁶ The opening line of the booklet’s section on ‘Tourist Attractions’ introduces Saskatchewan’s perennial fight to both embrace and change its ‘prairie’ image:

The Prairies. Miles upon miles of waving grain is something unusual and fascinating to tourists from more densely settled areas, but this province is not all a treeless, open prairie by any means. All over the whole settled area are hundreds of beautiful lakes surrounded by trees – beautiful resorts where fishing, bathing, boating and other sports may be enjoyed or a quiet holiday may bring rest and recuperation.

Playground of the West: In addition to Prince Albert National Park and seven provincial parks – Manitou, Katepwe, Cypress Hills, Duck Mountain, Greenwater Lake, Good Spirit Lake and Moose Mountain – there are beautiful lakes bordered with trees in almost every locality. ...Saskatchewan has earned well the title, Playground of the West.¹⁷

Calling itself both ‘the prairies’ and the ‘Playground of the West,’ (a title that mirrors the common moniker ‘Playground of the Prairies’ given to Prince Albert National Park¹⁸), Saskatchewan’s Bureau of Publications both used and tried to fight against its ‘prairie’ image.

Why the call for tourism? Tourist traffic, the bulletin noted, was important. Gross revenue from tourism in 1935, in the middle of the Great Depression, was over three quarters of a million dollars, neared one million in 1936, and exceeded it in 1939.¹⁹ The provincial government tracked closely the number of people entering Saskatchewan by rail or car, and was particularly careful to note how many visitors came each year from the United States. Both the number of people and the amount spent, the government noted, was

¹⁵ Sam J. Latta, Foreword, *Saskatchewan A Few Facts* (Regina: Bureau of Publications, 1940), p. 2.

¹⁶ *Saskatchewan A Few Facts* (Regina: Bureau of Publications, 1938), and *Saskatchewan A Few Facts*, 1940.

¹⁷ *Saskatchewan A Few Facts* 1938, p. 15; 1940, p. 23.

¹⁸ See Bill Waiser, *Saskatchewan’s Playground: A History of Prince Albert National Park* (Calgary: Fifth House, 1989); Merle Massie, *Forest Prairie Edge: Place History in Saskatchewan* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014).

¹⁹ *Saskatchewan A Few Facts* 1938 p. 15, 1940, p. 24.

increasing. Clearly, tourism was a profitable and growing business, and the province was keenly aware of the possibilities.

The bulletins reinforce the complexity of the province and many of its pictures feature northern scenes and economic diversity, in addition to the familiar pictures of prairies and wheat. Eleven pages are devoted to describing Saskatchewan's natural resources, while only five pages cover what the bulletin admits is "Saskatchewan's basic industry" of agriculture.²⁰ Within natural resources, water power has its own heading. In total, over a million horsepower of power could be harnessed from no less than 65 potential water power sites, a breathless figure meant to dazzle. But, the bulletin conceded, almost all of these sites are found across the provincial north. The section was a testimony to future possibilities, but even so, "A study of the power possibilities of every stream [in the province] is continuing." The province had not yet given up on finding a way to create cheap hydropower using its southern rivers.²¹

The pamphlets are a fascinating look at how the province chose to describe itself even in the midst of a major depression, and how it outlined its future, both in resource development and in tourism. What soon became clear, as the Depression receded and the war years ended, the prairie drought became a causal story, providing enormous impetus to the push to do what Hind envisioned so many years before, and dam the Saskatchewan.

The South Saskatchewan River Project

In 1935, in response to the enormous ecological and economic problems of the Great Depression on the open prairies, the federal government created the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration. The PFRA, as it was long known, had a mandate to investigate a wide range of possible solutions to rehabilitating the prairie economy and ecology, and setting it back on its feet. In essence, the PFRA was a policy creation built on the strength of the causal story: drought can be fought, using human resources and ideas. One of those solutions, investigated with rigour over many years, was the creation of a dam across the South Saskatchewan River. The dam's purpose, however, had changed. Instead of Hind's dam for navigation, or for power production, this dam was meant to combat future prairie drought.

L.B. Thompson, director of the PFRA, spoke to the University Women's Club in Regina in 1947. His topic, Water Conservation in Western Canada, painted a specific picture. While the PFRA's most obvious activities of building dugouts and damming small coulees had made some inroads into combating prairie aridity, these measures were small scale at best, creating stock watering ponds and reservoirs to water gardens.

The real future, he claimed, would become a reality when there was a dam built across the south Saskatchewan, initiating an era of widespread irrigation. It was, he felt, vital to the national economy. "Why don't you just get on with it?" audience members asked. He replied, such a massive project required years of study across a wide range of issues. Engineering concerns were paramount. Policy and

²⁰ *Saskatchewan A Few Facts* 1940, p. 36.

²¹ *Saskatchewan A Few Facts* 1940, p. 27.

politics, particularly securing permission from Alberta and Manitoba (with whom Saskatchewan shared responsibility for the Saskatchewan River), and finding funding were all critical.²²

The PFRA continued its investigations, concentrating on engineering, land and development policy, soil surveys, power reports, and a close look at historical and concurrent irrigation development in Alberta. They also produced a special *Report on Recreational Benefits*.²³ Their large and ongoing body of work garnered enough social, political, and media attention that pressure mounted on the federal government. The causal story embedded in the creation of the PFRA was prairie drought; the dam was their boldest, largest proposed response. It captured the imagination of many who had lived through the focusing event of the drought and believed in the causal story that the dam would be an audacious, but appropriate, massive pre-emptive strike against certain future prairie droughts.

In response to increasing public pressure, the Privy Council set out a mandate for a Royal Commission on the South Saskatchewan River Project 24 August 1951. The Commission had two goals:

- (1) Whether the economic and social returns to the Canadian people on the investment in the proposed South Saskatchewan River Project (Central Saskatchewan Development) would be commensurate with the cost thereof;
- (2) Whether the said Project represents the most profitable and desirable use which can be made of the physical resources involved.

The Order in Council also noted “That the Commissioners be further authorized to include in their examination and to report upon all matters which the Commissioners may consider pertinent or relevant to the general scope of the inquiry.”²⁴

Throughout the report, embedded in phrases written by the report Commissioners but particularly in submissions and statements given to the commission from various provincial, municipal, and other groups, lies references to the prairie aridity dirty thirties causal story. “Saskatchewan stressed the disastrous economic and social consequences...upon the life of the people of Saskatchewan,” the report writers noted.²⁵ In chapter three, “The Historical Setting,” which outlined settlement and agricultural development policy, the Great Depression had an eleven-page sub-heading, simply called “The Disastrous Decade, 1930-1939.” The section featured the origins of the PFRA, created by a rehabilitation policy.²⁶ Alberta submissions reached further into the historical past, grounding irrigation in past climatic events, but a submission from W.L. Jacobson on irrigation states “The basic need or demand for irrigation has been intensified by the prolonged drought of the ‘Thirties.’”²⁷ The Town of Outlook, near the proposed site of the dam, wrote “Past history has taught us that we will again have droughts, however, with

²² “Predicts Bright Future for Prairie Farmers.” *Chronicle*, April 24 1949, p. 5. Accessed through Peel’s Prairie Provinces, August 26, 2014.

²³ Cited in “Introduction and Acknowledgements,” *South Saskatchewan River Report of the Royal Commission on the South Saskatchewan River Project* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1952), p. 43.

²⁴ *South Saskatchewan River Report*, p. xi, xv.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114-125.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

irrigation we are confident that this community and its people will not again be subjected to such desolation and heartbreak as experienced during the 1930s.”²⁸

One author, J.C. Carter, a private farmer, waxed rhapsodic, striking a note of historical fear. He noted evidence that the Sahara Desert was once fertile. “It does not require a great stretch of imagination to those here in the thirties to induce the thought that under the conditions then existing, which may return, this area and a large part of Saskatchewan could easily become desert land.”²⁹ The local doctor, W.B. Tufts, added his point of view: “To us it is no longer a question of dollar returns, but through the sad experiences of the past, born out of stretches of bad years, it has become a problem of maintenance of proper standards of health, of education, a wish for security, and freedom from want and fear.” He spoke of people “scarred forever” by privation and black blizzards.³⁰

The City of Regina also called forth the “30s” in its argument for the dam. Its submission drew straight lines between that “crippling and disastrous” decade and Saskatchewan’s economic health in the 1950s: “our citizens are still suffering” from lack of amenities.³¹ The City of Moose Jaw also reviewed the drought years through an economic lens, and stated “the dread toll of drought can be partially averted” by a large-scale irrigation and reservoir project on the south Saskatchewan.³²

Tying drought to economics brought forth a particular story thread from the 1930s: relief. Federal, provincial, and municipal relief cost millions of dollars and sent governments into the red. Wouldn’t it be better to put that money forward now into a massive dam project, rather than wait and waste it later? The alternative to building the dam, George Spence (by 1952 a past director of the PFRA) argued, was “to go on paying out large sums of public money for the relief of distress without getting anything in return.”³³ Better to spend that money now, on something tangible. And money, others pointed out, could be readily spent during war. Why not invest during peace? Economics, in many variations, coloured a large number of submissions.

In the end, George Spence summed up the political and policy-window ramifications of the prairie drought causal story: “no one who lived through the great drought of the thirties can ever forget the hardships and the tragedy of that period, or remain indifferent to measures designed to better the situation.”³⁴ What the large-scale dam project promised was audacious hope.

Recreation in the Royal Commission on the South Saskatchewan River Project Report

The primary benefit of the dam would be irrigation, but it had four secondary benefits considered of major importance. These were hydro-electric power, a major new water supply source, stream and flood control, and recreation facilities.³⁵ In the interest of connecting tourism to the larger causal story of prairie

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 284-285.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 303-304.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 308.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

aridity focused through the drought, I will focus on how recreation is framed as an outcome by both the report commissioners and the submissions.

The project aimed to impound about eight million acre-feet of water, creating a reservoir extending 140 miles up and down the South Saskatchewan River and another thirty miles down the Qu'Appelle River valley. The final shoreline would be about 500 miles. The hydrology is important. In addition to the main reservoir, the project would enable a gravity feed of fresh water directly into the Qu'Appelle River system. This gravity feed would fill and freshen Buffalo Pound Lake, which was in the process of becoming the main water source for two major prairie cities, Regina and Moose Jaw.

From Buffalo Pound Lake, a series of smaller diversion dams could control water levels in the entire chain of lakes connected to the Qu'Appelle system. These included Last Mountain Lake, Fishing Lakes (also known as the Calling Lakes: Pasqua, Echo, Mission, and Katepwe Lakes), Crooked Lake, and Round Lake. All of these lakes along the Qu'Appelle already had significant development as local and provincial recreational sites, including a provincial park at Katepwe (Katepwa).³⁶ These lakes would benefit from the project with “maintenance of the levels of these lakes, [which] would safeguard and greatly enhance the amenities of the Valley region.”³⁷ Lake levels and water quality on all of these lakes had declined drastically during the drought years, undercutting their recreational value. The massive dam and diversion projects could restore these lakes “to levels of the better years.”³⁸

The report commissioners noted: “the recreational value of the South Saskatchewan Project is unique. . . . It would create new facilities for hunting, fishing, swimming, boating, picnicking, camping and summer cottage life on a scale that is not readily available to a majority of the people of the dry plains.”³⁹ As a result of the new reservoir and the stabilization of lakes in the Qu'Appelle system, “at least two-thirds of the people of the province will be within a two-hour auto journey of a large body of water created or improved by the project.” By building the reservoir, recreational activities and tourism in a region not known for its water would increase. “For the first time, for many people, there will be an opportunity to enjoy outdoor recreation on a grand scale.”⁴⁰

Putting a dollar value on recreation, both the original PFRA report and the Royal Commission report noted, was problematic: “because of the intangible nature of recreation benefits they are incapable of expression in monetary terms.”⁴¹ In an attempt to find a suitable dollar value, the PFRA report quoted a per-acre value for water surface developed in the United States, in an unnamed report. Scaled down to reflect a less dense population, the report suggested that the South Saskatchewan River project would realize a “water-rental” benefit equalling about \$90,000 per year.⁴²

For the most part, recreation and tourism were considered long-run economic and social benefits, with the pendulum swinging mainly toward the social side of recreation, though some gave thought to the economic benefits of tourism. The Retail Merchants' Association of Canada brief stated that restoring

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23, 39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 336. Submission of the Retail Merchants' Association of Canada (Saskatchewan) Incorporation.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 253.

lakes and creating a new reservoir would “give the Province the opportunity to develop these outlets for the holidaymaker so as to provide the tourist from other Provinces and the United States with the inducement to spend more time in this Province resulting in greater prosperity through more money staying in Saskatchewan.”⁴³ The brief from the Saskatchewan provincial Industrial Development Office spoke of tourism as “one of the most interesting developments” coming out of the project. Although “blessed with a number of beautiful vacation playgrounds, principally north of Prince Albert, as well as at a number of locations in the Southern portion of the province,” the proposed massive reservoir project would improve accessibility to a “new oasis” in the south. Moreover, increasing recreational opportunities would increase existing tourist traffic from the US, “impelled by a desire to travel to a foreign land in search of clear, fresh waters well stocked with fish.”⁴⁴

By damming the Saskatchewan into a reservoir, the natural fish population of the river was expected to explode. Northern pike, walleye, and gold-eye numbers would increase, and the fish would be larger. With water levels stabilized, fishing on the Qu’Appelle system should also improve, the PFRA report predicted. Irrigation districts in Alberta noted a large increase in migratory and game bird populations, including pheasants. Bird hunting draws hunters, a different but equally profitable kind of tourist.⁴⁵

In the report, prairie aridity was a given, a fact of life in southern Saskatchewan. The specific focusing event of the thirties did not need to be reiterated in terms of tourism, as it already pervaded so many of the briefs. What was significant is that the social hardships brought on by prairie aridity could be counteracted by increasing access to water. The aesthetic benefits of water “in the lakes, in the ditches and on the land will surely result in the development of trees and shrubs, and although no monetary value may be attached to this factor, it will make all of this area a better country to live in.”⁴⁶ The Summary Report of the PFRA put a final phrasing on the point: “At the end, but possibly the most important benefits” of the project “with water on a dry land plain are given the opportunity and encouragement of working miracles” in creating welcoming beauty.⁴⁷

The possibilities of water and beauty “would add qualitatively to living in an area almost devoid of natural trees, lakes, and streams and good sites for parks. . . .the countless human benefits that are possible include better health, educational and aesthetic opportunities, and countless factors needed for better and fuller living.”⁴⁸ The subtext to such a grandiose claim was that prairie aridity, or the *status quo* of southern Saskatchewan, was a landscape devoid of natural beauty, in need of human intervention through a massive, large-scale water damming project, in order to change both the face, and the future, of the prairies.

Discussion and Conclusions

While irrigation to relieve future drought was the main purpose of the dam, the Royal Commission report reveals fascinating secondary considerations around tourism. Several points should be considered. At the broadest level, tourism through the provision and enhancement of lake recreation ran distinctly counter to

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 330. Submission from the Saskatoon Board of Trade and City of Saskatoon.

⁴⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

the prairie aridity story. Through water, aridity is banished, and the scale is tipped towards a counter-vision of lushness, with green grass and trees – even if only at ‘oasis’ sites. In an area “almost devoid” of natural recreational sites, the South Saskatchewan River project report used *contrast* as an effective narrative tool. It paints a ‘before and after’ picture of dry, frightening, and stressful work versus wet, hopeful and fun play.

Accessing the causal story of prairie aridity and using it to shape public and government opinion toward ‘fixing’ the problem by creating a massive reservoir through human intervention garnered a large measure of support. Recreational facilities would be boosted, and tourism strengthened, through a willingness to put energy and money into the South Saskatchewan River Project and dam the Saskatchewan. As a result, both tangible and intangible benefits would ensue. On a monetary level, there would be a noticeable increase in tourism potential, something the province of Saskatchewan had always supported, even in the legendary dry years. Any possible avenue toward ‘greater prosperity,’ with the Great Depression in the rear-view mirror, brought enthusiasm.

Yet, the report and those who wrote submissions to the commission clearly recognized the dam and reservoir’s intangible benefits. The report commissioners stressed that long-run benefits must increase productive capacity, which would contribute to the national income. Some of these benefits, though, such as recreation, “cannot be fully covered in a national accounting.”⁴⁹ They could be seen through “broad social benefits” through increased recreation and localized beauty, extensions of available local services, employment and business opportunities, and something called “closer community life.”⁵⁰ The intangible benefits “are real and tremendously important,” and scent the report with fresh air, the sound of rippling water, and the feel of sunshine.

Residents of southern Saskatchewan looked ‘forward to the creation of a new oasis’ whose ‘recreational opportunities and aesthetic benefits’ would be available to all. There is an egalitarianistic overtone to this part of the narrative, suggesting that the dam and reservoir would help even out, even overturn, the uneven landscape polarity of the province. If the south lacked the natural amenities of trees and lakes found across the north, they could be created. Tourism (by the 1950s) centered on car tourism whose axis turned on accessibility and proximity. Possibly the strongest argument for building the dam, from a tourism perspective, is that the new reservoir would bring more people in southern Saskatchewan closer to a large lake suitable for swimming, fishing, and boating.

There is a sub-text of ‘damming Saskatchewan’ that is partially ironic and partially true. Saskatchewan had been ‘dammed’ by its dual story of prairie aridity. The flat, treeless landscape of work, of sometimes hopeless work in the face of extended bouts of aridity, a story crystalized into diamond-hard sharpness by the dirty thirties, contributed to a provincial desperation to *do something* about the problem. The dam would physically change southwestern Saskatchewan, the heart of the Palliser Triangle drybelt. Some even hoped that the new large water body would change weather patterns in the area, hoping it would create a local microclimate effect of increased evaporation and precipitation.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 247, 253.

Despite the stirring calls from various submissions, the 1952 *Royal Commission on the South Saskatchewan River* issued a negative report.

The Commission finds that at present the economic returns to the Canadian people on the investment in the proposed South Saskatchewan River Project are not commensurate with the cost thereof; though the Project would yield social returns which, while they cannot be measured for the purpose of this Report, would be of great value to the region in which it is situated.⁵¹

The key point is *at present*. The report notes that the project would go forward, when political will and economics shifted. Building the dam would be “a task of statesmanship”⁵² and would have to wait – but not for long.

The 1958 election promise of a Saskatchewan-born Conservative Prime Minister, J.G. Diefenbaker, finally broke the hold on the national public purse in favour of remaking Saskatchewan. Diefenbaker won a landslide victory, and the PFRA soon after swung into action to build what came to be called the Gardiner Dam (after James Gardiner, past Saskatchewan premier and previous Minister for Agriculture) to impound the large reservoir, named Diefenbaker Lake. The dam and the lake were officially ‘opened’ 21 July 1967 and today, few remember what western Canada looked like before the dam, and the reservoir, came to be.

The focusing event of the dirty thirties gave power to the causal story: that prairie aridity could be overcome by the audaciously bold and large plan to build a dam across the Saskatchewan and create a massive reservoir lake and subsequent prairie oasis. Historian Max McDonald captured the essence of this causal story in the title to his book on the Gardiner Dam: *The Dam the Drought Built*.⁵³ The focusing event of the 1930s prairie drought tied southern Saskatchewan’s prairie aridity identity firmly together. But what to do? Can drought be fought? Can prairie be fought? Can it be changed? What, most importantly, is the potential positive social aspect of a large-scale environmental intervention?

Would the dam and reservoir have been built solely for recreation and tourism purposes? The answer, of course, would be ‘no.’ The dam’s main purpose and four secondary benefits – irrigation, hydro, urban water supply, flood control, and recreation – all fed into the final decision. But the irrigation and power potential of the project have never been fully realized. The social impact of the reservoir, the tourism and recreation impact of both Lake Diefenbaker and its ability to flush fresh water through the Qu’Appelle valley system, has had a far more important impact.

Lake Diefenbaker is a fixture in the Saskatchewan landscape, to the point where many people have forgotten that it is not a ‘natural’ lake. Yet its roots, and the political will to put it in place, lie firmly within the critical causal story of prairie aridity. The dirty thirties dammed Saskatchewan; Saskatchewan dammed the dirty thirties.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵³ Max McDonald, *The Dam the Drought Built*. (Regina: University of Regina Press, 1999).