

## The lesson of acequias for today's world

By Orlando Romero Posted:

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*Commentary*

While the old adage is quite true, “There is nothing quite as lovely as a tree,” for me there is nothing more beautiful in the spring than to see the numerous acequias in our village running, announcing spring. In this harsh land of “*Dias de mas y dias de menos*,” where at times drought can linger for years or unexpected frosts can kill the last bit of fruit on your trees, acequias running full of water at least offer hope.

I always marvel at our ancestors’ tenacity and ability to survive in such a hostile environment. Yet they did survive, mostly because they knew how to manage water efficiently, fairly and even in an environmental manner that today we can’t seem to accomplish or appreciate.

A few years ago while attending a conference in Madrid, we took a bullet train down to Valencia on the Mediterranean to visit and stay with friends. The highlight of our visit for me was attending an open-air proceeding of the “Tribunal de Aguas.” These men in robes form a semicircle, and pronouncements are made regarding the use of water in the Province of Valencia. This tradition dates from Medieval Spain and the *partidor de aguas* or *cequier* which is equivalent to a water chief, which is very much in keeping with the traditions of our present-day mayordomo.

Besides *cequi*ers, other officials were the *veeder* who oversaw the duties of the *cequi*ers. The *veedor* represented the rights of the *comuna*, that is, a community of irrigators. According to Jose Rivera in *Acequia Culture ... water, land, and community in the Southwest*, “In Spain, as in Colonial New Mexico, the job of these local water inspectors, called ‘veedores’ or ‘hombres peritos’ (expert men) much like New Mexico, was to insure that customary practices were being followed, especially under conditions of water scarcity or in the settlement of disputes.”

What is more astonishing to me in this land of water scarcity is the strong environmental standards that our ancestors created during the Spanish colonial period, way before the Environmental Protection Agency. Because *acequias* also provided fresh drinking water, no *acequia* was to be contaminated by washing clothes, washing hides, etc., or any other source of detriment that might affect the community. And I must add, this included both Hispano and Indian communities, because they were both united by *acequias*. Fines were real in those early days instead of a slap on the wrist.

If you take a hard look, realistically, where there is anything that grows and thrives in this land of water scarcity, it is along *acequias*. From Socorro and even farther south to southern Colorado, earthworms to mighty 200-year-old cottonwood trees, salamanders, water snakes, etc., and our aquifers depend mightily on *acequias*. Like the veins in our bodies supplying much-needed nourishment to our hearts and brains, without our *acequias* there would be no life as we know it.

These *acequias* were a minor marvel of engineering. If one visits Spain today, the remnants of Roman aqueducts dot the countryside. Moorish *acequias* still deliver precious cold water to the Alhambra. In New Mexico, our earliest colonial *acequia* goes back to 1598 with the establishment of San Gabriel by Oñate’s settlers. In fact, one of the most important factors in establishing a community was the need and requirement that *acequias* be constructed to water fields for food.

In this harsh yet beautiful land, our ancestors, both Hispanic and Native American, must be turning over in their graves when they see one more golf course and one more casino or one more development open. Every drop of water is precious and sacred for life. One can only question in this arid land where we lost the message.

Maybe greenbacks are more important than green oasis. With climate change radically affecting our weather and our entire lives on this planet, it is going to take radical measures to curb our water abusers. Unfortunately, our politicians prefer to look the other way as long as the political contributions keep coming in.

*Orlando Romero is a historian and writer.*