



Global Water Project

Conservationist Sandra Postel '78 sees a silver lining
in the fight for water conservation.

WRITTEN BY Julie Vitto

There was a time when early explorers described the vast Colorado River Delta as “nowhere and everywhere” with “a hundred green lagoons” offering pleasant paths to the Gulf of California.

Today, however, one of the largest desert estuaries in the world is virtually depleted from decades of dam construction along the river’s southwest route.

This spring, Sandra Postel, director of the independent Global Water Policy Project, addressed the challenges surrounding water conservation in an inspiring Commencement speech, which recognized the silver lining around global issues of change.

She identified the unique opportunity the Class of 2017 has to reimagine human society: “what it looks like, how it functions and, perhaps most importantly, what it values.”

For the past 30 years, Postel has been at the forefront of freshwater conservation efforts in the United States. She says that by the age of 15, it became clear that her strong interest in the environment would call her to do something on behalf of the Earth. This calling led her to pilot the freshwater conservation and restoration initiative, *Change the Course*, which has restored around 8 billion gallons of water to rivers and wetlands in the U.S.

Postel’s forthcoming book, *Replenish: The Virtuous Cycle of Water and Prosperity*, is a solution-oriented guide that addresses how working with nature, rather than trying to control it, helps us negotiate times of rapid change.

“It’s a very optimistic book,” says Postel. “It tells the story of what farmers and ranchers and communities are doing not only in this country but around the world to use water better, and to show how working with nature is the way to build resilience and improve water security for the future in a cost effective way.”

With a B.A. in geology and political science, Postel has realized the value of a liberal arts education in her work. She says the caring and accessible faculty at Wittenberg prepared her for the kind of thinking she wanted to do in order to communicate with the broader public about how society uses, manages and values freshwater.

“The interdisciplinary nature of learning at a liberal arts school just made a huge difference for me because you don’t get silos in your thinking,” she says. “Water, the issue I have studied and worked on and researched and written about for so many years, is a very interdisciplinary subject.”

At Duke University, Postel first explored her interest in freshwater conservation in her master’s thesis on wetlands and their economic value. After graduate school, she did some project work related to freshwater and groundwater for a small, natural resources company in California. Her work “crystallized” for her when she conducted research at the Worldwatch Institute in Washington, D.C., which focuses on global environmental issues.

“I just sort of got bit by the freshwater bug and never let it go,” she says.



After serving from 1988 to 1994 as vice president for research at the Worldwatch Institute, Postel founded the independent Global Water Policy Project. She describes the organization as the “umbrella” under which everything she does around freshwater falls, including Change the Course.

In 2010, Postel was appointed Freshwater Fellow of the National Geographic Society where, under her leadership, National Geographic and its partners piloted Change the Course in the Colorado River Basin. The initiative began as a way to promote water stewardship across North America with the intent to bring the general public, the business community and the conservation community together to use water more wisely and to conserve and restore rivers and wetlands.

As a result, the initiative restored billions of gallons of water to the Colorado River Basin from its headwaters in the Rocky

Mountains to the Colorado River Delta in Mexico. Postel says watching the once depleted segment of the Colorado River flow to its home in the Gulf of California was a highlight of her life.

Change the Course is currently working on 30 different projects in the U.S. and has expanded to California and Georgia. Postel’s vision is to make a difference on an international level, but she is eager to focus on opportunities at the local level, as well.

“There are so many water challenges to meet right here in the U.S. and North America. So it feels good to me to make a difference here, and really understand what our capacity and potential is,” she says.

“It’s disheartening to see the attempts to back away from the gains we’ve made on protecting land and water and the atmosphere,” she adds. “But people are stepping up and getting more engaged. That is the silver lining.”