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Paddling the Green River

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Heather Hansman: Exploring climate change one stroke—and story—at a time

By Stephen Collins '74

If you've followed the career of outdoor writer Heather Hansman '05, you'll recognize her gasping for air after dumping her raft-load of customers into a Class V rapid on the Gauley River, avoiding avalanches in deep backcountry powder in the Rockies and Cascades, or dodging toxic algae and scary big koi swimming in an urban lake in Seattle.

It's been a winding stretch of river getting Hansman from Cambridge, Mass., to Colby, to raft guide and ski bum, to freelance writing, to a graduate degree in environmental journalism, to recruited book author.

A veteran of writing and editing gigs at top skiing and outdoor magazines, she arrives in 2019 as an author with *Downriver: Into the Future of Water in the West*, out from the University of Chicago Press in April. And there's another book under contract, that one on the past and future of ski bums in the era of climate change.

Embracing the outdoors with an intense focus on the environment and climate change goes back to her time on Mayflower Hill, where Hansman was an English major with a concentration in creative writing and an environmental studies minor. She had an academic path, but no specific career aspirations. "I wasn't one of those kids who came in with a plan," she said from her home base in Seattle. "I was kind of like, 'I like to read and write. I like to be outside.'"

The spring after her first year, her mother dropped her off at a rafting company in Caratunk, Maine, where her years in outdoor adventure got launched in the Kennebec River gorge. Skiing, too, was a big part of her life, so after one last summer on Maine rivers following graduation, she headed west. "Two of my best friends from Colby and I moved out and did the ski bum thing."

They landed in Beaver Creek, Colo., and for the next several years she guided rafts and skied. "And then I ended up blowing out my shoulder kayaking and I was like, 'OK. Maybe this season off.'"

By then she'd been doing some writing for the local newspaper and was attracted to a program at the University of Colorado in Boulder that combined a master's in journalism with an environmental policy certificate.

Internships during grad school led to a job when her boss at *Skiing* magazine hired Hansman to be online editor. It was a good fit. She wrote and edited stories and ran the *Skiing* website and social media until the online editor position opened at *Powder* magazine in Southern California, where she won an award for best use of social media.

She returned to freelance writing about five years ago, and her clips are impressive—*Outside*, *Smithsonian*, *National Geographic*, the *Guardian*, *Atlantic*—and they span a breadth of subjects to make a liberal arts college proud: skiing and whitewater, yes, but also the effects of climate change on residents of the Arctic, public land policy and Congress, a rise in wildland firefighters' suicides, undocumented children in the Southwest, a mobile slaughterhouse that makes small farms sustainable in the Pacific Northwest.

An enterprising literary agent liked that last feature, published in *California Sunday*, so well that she cold-called Hansman to inquire if she would be interested in writing a book. Together they figured out that combining Hansman's river adventures and her journalism and analytic skills would mesh well. So she set off to paddle the entire Green River, traversing more than 600 miles, exploring water rights and shortages along the way. "Climate



change is central to the whole book and the whole water battle,” she said.

Writing about complex topics like climate science and environmental issues is easier, Hansman said, with the broad liberal arts background. “The breadth of the education allows people to understand a wider range of stories and synthesize information better,” she said. “The hard part of journalism often is drawing connections instead of just reporting ‘this happened and then this happened.’ Why do we care? There is that liberal arts way of looking at the world.”

Ultimately the reward is being able to tell stories that people desperately need to understand, relate to, and retain.

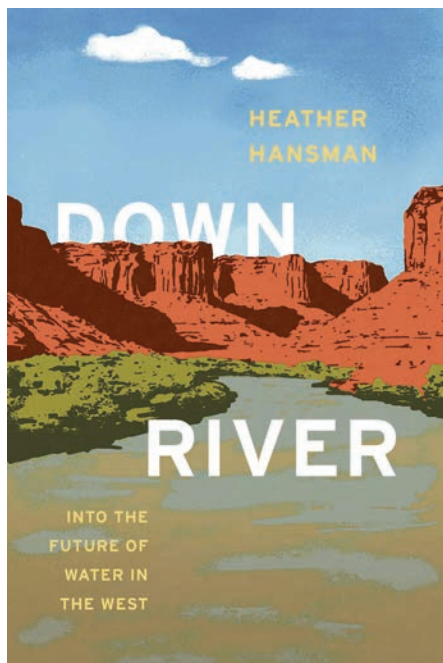
“Climate change can feel so big and overwhelming. Where do you even start?” Hansman asked. “How do you make these big, slow-moving environmental problems concrete and interesting to people?”

So the reading, writing, and being outdoors worked out for Hansman. “It’s funny,” she said. “When the book came together my mom was like, ‘Hey! This stuff is all paying off. It all makes sense!’

“It’s like I had a plan all along.”

The Green River flows through parts of Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado. Writer Heather Hansman '05 paddled 600 miles of the river to see the effects of climate change on the watershed.





Heather Hansman '05

Downriver: Into the Future of Water in the West
(University of Chicago Press, 2019)

Supply and Demand:

A River Tells the Story of Water and Climate

As the climate in the Colorado River basin trends hotter and drier in the 21st century, demand for water across Southwestern states continues growing.

Parched farms, water-intensive oil and gas fields, thirsty cities, river ecology managers and preservationists, and a growing outdoor recreation economy compete for water from the Colorado and its tributaries under an arcane and unrealistically generous system of water rights and permits established in an earlier, wetter era. Inflows to Lake Powell, downstream near the Utah-New Mexico border, were 2 percent of normal in August 2018, and in September that dropped to 1 percent.

It's as clear as an alpine spring: there isn't enough to go around.

Heather Hansman '05—who moved west after Colby to make her living on Colorado rivers and then earned a master's in journalism with a focus on the environment—recognized the magnitude and complexity of the looming crisis and put her diverse skills to work. For *Downriver: Into the Future of Water in the West* she immersed herself—literally, paddling more than 600 miles from the source of the Green River to its confluence with the Colorado, and figuratively, diving into water policy debates to seek out disparate voices and opinions along the way.

Building a narrative around her downstream progress, she combines lyrical descriptions of the river running through high deserts and breathtaking canyons with the emotional freight of a woman often traveling alone through cowboy country and remote wilderness.

But the heart of the book is the inevitable conflict over priorities when there's not enough of a resource to go around. Who will survive? The rancher whose family has for 100 years diverted water to irrigate 2,000 acres to raise cattle? Or endangered native species of fish that are a bellwether for the health of the river ecosystem? What about thirsty cities, including Denver and Salt Lake, where urban growth requires more H₂O? Or industries hoping to develop some of the most significant gas fields in the country?

Trying, as a journalist, to ignore her own preconceptions, Hansman found that talking to real people along the way “really confronted my own assumptions about what was good and what was the right thing to do,” she said. “It was trying to be open to the facts, which is really hard, thinking about things that impact everyone's livelihood.”

Expect no pat answers in *Downriver*. “Just because someone's perspective is different than yours, it's not necessarily wrong,” she said. “These people have these longtail reasons for why they're doing what they're doing.”

—Stephen Collins '74

Emmie Theberge Sophie Janeway

**Trained globally,
acting locally to
shape Maine's
climate priorities**

By Gerry Boyle '78



By the time they graduated, Emmie Theberge '08 and Sophie Janeway '17 had, between them, studied conservation policy in Ecuador, wind power legislation in Maine, human interaction with the ecology of the Galápagos Islands, changing fisheries in Vietnam, the effect of climate change on Moroccan farmers, the environmental impact of multinational corporations in Bolivia, the efficacy of state-level environmental advocacy in the United States, and an economic model for conservation of native grasses in Australia.

Then, after Colby, they turned all of their formidable knowledge, skills, and experience to the mission of protecting Maine's natural environment and way of life—mostly from the already infiltrating effects of climate change. “For me, it's pretty much entirely what I'm doing,” Janeway said.

Theberge and Janeway studied globally and are acting locally. They work at the Natural Resources Council of Maine, the state's biggest environmental organization, with more than 20,000 members, wide-ranging philanthropy and outreach programs, and the ear of state and federal policymakers. Janeway is climate and clean energy outreach coordinator, overseeing a team that works with Mainers on ways to address climate change with better energy solutions. Theberge leads efforts to mitigate threats to the organization's work from federal policies.

There are many these days, they say, as the Trump administration reverses many of the environmental initiatives put in place by President Obama. Theberge first went to work at NRCM as Obama was coming into office and watched as national policy converged with environmental priorities.

“You can't compare it with anything else because the impact is much deeper and much, much worse,” Theberge said of the directives coming from the White House. “That is where we get our motivation from. A lot of people are concerned about what these threats are and want to take action.”

Like Theberge, Janeway needed little time after Colby to get up to speed. She works to encourage Mainers—and their elected representatives—to understand the need for cleaner and more sustainable energy policies.

In addition to her global research, at Colby Janeway studied the ways state-level environmental advocacy worked—and didn't work—around the country. She noted a course taught by Assistant Professor of Government Laura Seay that had students prepare a complex grant application—and then advocate for their project. That knowledge is brought to bear as she interacts with business owners and other Mainers to encourage more efficient energy use, from electricity to home heating to transportation.

“There's so much at stake,” Janeway said. “That's what motivates us to get out of bed and go to work every day. There's not really another choice.”