

# The Salt Lake Tribune

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## Op-ed: The poisoned Animas River is a wake-up call we must answer

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PUBLISHED: AUGUST 15, 2015 03:00PM

UPDATED: AUGUST 15, 2015 03:00PM

It started slow, just one call the first day, but by midweek our small family business, Holiday River Expeditions, was getting spackled with calls from soon-to-be guests, asking, “Hey, is my river trip still on? Is the river OK?”

What they meant to ask was, “Will my raft be floating on the chalky orange waters I see on the nightly news?”

I have the good fortune of answering, “No, not your trip. Your trip is fine. We are running rivers the same as we always have for 49 years; the majority of the Colorado River drainage is unaffected.”



But that’s only part of my answer. The reality is, the orange hue of the Animas River will have an impact on the Colorado River, but not in the way we might think.

The Gold King Mine disaster is not simply a disaster but more of a wakeup call. In truth, that lesser river drainage of the Colorado has been toxic for years, had species die-offs for decades, been a national sacrifice zone for generations. The Colorado Plateau is freckled with old abandoned mines, scars of exploits, ticking time-bombs. If we were paying any attention to the tar sands spills into the Kalamazoo River in Michigan, the chemical inundated Elk River in West Virginia or coal-ash decimating the Emory and Clinch rivers in Tennessee, we wouldn’t be that surprised by the neon waterway splashed across the news. Yet it shocks us that these ghosts of extraction past continue to visit us with bad news.

The sobering reality is that if we continue on our current trajectory, selling off mineral rights to the dirtiest bidder, our state will be saddled with a whole new series of prospective Superfund sites. Just like Durango, we will fight tooth and nail to keep from being labeled a toxic zone. We will beg and bargain with the EPA to quietly take federal money to clean up our tar sands strip mine or oil shale mega-oven or frack-gas wastelands without calling them that terrifying name, "Superfund."

We are a proud, wild state with immensely beautiful rivers and landscapes, but we must recognize our current path is leading us to a future not too different from Durango. Water connects us all, and we desperately need a little less hubris and a little more humility in our approach to management of the last wild places we have.

I hope that this breach will, like any watershed, create a conversation with the inescapable gravitational force of rivers to take down the mountain of myths we have wrapped ourselves in. We must flow down to the brutal truths of water in the West. We don't have a lot of it, and what water we do have needs protecting. This disaster shows us we have a fundamental choice. Will we invest in a future that values clean water and health or one that begets more sacrifice zones and Superfund sites? The choice is up to us.

Lauren Wood is a third generation river guide and trip director for Holiday River expeditions.

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