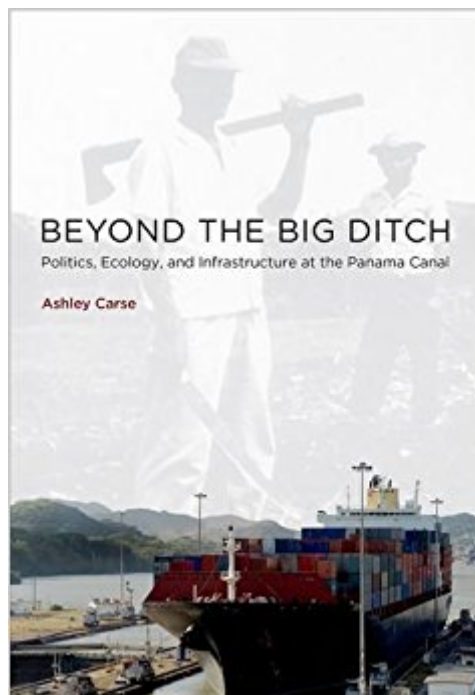




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# **Beyond The Big Ditch: Politics, Ecology, And Infrastructure At The Panama Canal (Infrastructures)**



## Synopsis

In this innovative book, Ashley Carse traces the water that flows into and out from the Panama Canal to explain how global shipping is entangled with Panama's cultural and physical landscapes. By following container ships as they travel downstream along maritime routes and tracing rivers upstream across the populated watershed that feeds the canal, he explores the politics of environmental management around a waterway that links faraway ports and markets to nearby farms, forests, cities, and rural communities. Carse draws on a wide range of ethnographic and archival material to show the social and ecological implications of transportation across Panama. The Canal moves ships over an aquatic staircase of locks that demand an enormous amount of fresh water from the surrounding region. Each passing ship drains 52 million gallons out to sea -- a volume comparable to the daily water use of half a million Panamanians. Infrastructures like the Panama Canal, Carse argues, do not simply conquer nature; they rework ecologies in ways that serve specific political and economic priorities. Interweaving histories that range from the depopulation of the U.S. Canal Zone a century ago to road construction conflicts and water hyacinth invasions in canal waters, the book illuminates the human and nonhuman actors that have come together at the margins of the famous trade route. 2014 marks the 100th anniversary of the Panama Canal. *Beyond the Big Ditch* calls us to consider how infrastructures are materially embedded in place, producing environments with winners and losers.

## Book Information

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The best works in environmental anthropology often redirect our attention, showing us something on the landscape that we had been looking at all along but not seeing. In a fine example of this tradition, Ashley Carse suggests that in order to understand infrastructure like the Panama Canal, we need to turn it 'upside down' to examine its otherwise unexamined 'background work.' Going 'beyond the big ditch,' Carse gives us an engrossing history and ethnography of the canal's headwaters, floodplain, interior, and backwaters. Whereas the canal is an icon of global assembly and connection, in this important new work Carse tells the untold story of the dis-assembly and dis-connection that have also attended its construction and operation -- a tension that continues to play out down to the present day. (Michael R. Dove, Margaret K. Musser Professor of Social Ecology, Yale University; author of *The Banana Tree at the Gate: A History of Marginal Peoples and Global Markets in Borneo*) For a century we have celebrated the Panama Canal as a discrete and complete work of heroic engineering. But, as Ashley Carse suggests in this important new book, the canal is better conceptualized as a piece of living infrastructure, one that has reached beyond its banks, into the lives and landscapes of Panamanians and other global citizens. By redefining what the Panama Canal is, and how it works, Carse has given us a powerful new narrative of environmental modernity. (Paul Sutter, Associate Professor of History, University of Colorado at Boulder) *Beyond the Big Ditch* is a thoughtful, deeply informed, multifaceted, and nuanced look at the history, meanings, and varied impact of the Panama Canal. Ashley Carse's transdisciplinary approach is masterful, allowing the reader to see physical infrastructure in its inception, construction, maintenance, and decay, as an evolving entity and force in social, political, economic, and ecological realms. This immensely valuable text is an essential read for students and scholars in environmental social science, international development, earth science, and civil engineering. (Barbara Rose Johnston, Senior Research Fellow, Center for Political Ecology; editor of *Water, Cultural Diversity, and Global Environmental Change*)

Ashley Carse, an anthropologist, is currently a National Science Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in Science, Technology, and Society at the University of Virginia.

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