

## AWRA Women in Water Resources Interview #5: Lisa Beutler



*This interview is the fifth and final piece of a series, written/conducted by AWRA Immediate Past President Martha Narvaez, celebrating the role of AWRA Women in Water Resources.*

### ***Length of Time in the Water Resources Field***

15 +

### ***Current Position***

Executive Facilitator, MWH now part of Stantec

### ***Positions Held***

- Associate Director, Center for Collaborative Policy, California State University Sacramento
- Office of the Governor, CA
- Undersecretary, CA Youth and Adult Correctional Agency (multiple Corrections assignments)
- Chief Ranger, CA State Parks & City of Fremont (started career as State Park Ranger)
- Manager, CA State Lands Commission

### ***Education***

- S. Human Relations and Organizational Behavior, University of San Francisco (honors graduate)
- Quality Management, 2-yr Certificate, Los Rios College

### ***Honors and Appointments***

- National Park Police – Commendation for assistance with off-shore rescue involving a boating accident
- CA Boating Safety Officers Association – Award – for facilitating improved Boating Safety in California
- Excellence Award, US Army Corps of Engineers and the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (first joint award ever given) for work on protection of Lake Tahoe
- Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM) Tom Lee State Award for work on the Floodplain Management Task Force.
- American Water Resources Association – President’s Award,
- YWCA, Certificate of Outstanding Sacramento Woman for contributions to the peace officer profession
- CA STATE SENATE – appointed member, Advisory Task Force on a State Department of Public Safety
- CA Governor – performance award for service as the Liaison to the Governor’s Criminal Justice Council
- CA Department of Corrections – multiple service & performance awards
- CA Department of Water Resources – Director’s awards (3) for work on the California Water Plan

## Leadership (Current)

- American Society for Public Administration – Chapter Board member and Officer
- American Water Resources Association – National Board member
- Editorial Board, Maven's Notebook (CA Water Publication)

## Q&A

**How did you get involved in the water resources field?** Water found me.

I started my career as a state park ranger, which is primarily a land management job, but much of my work intersected with water-related research or policy in some way. This included working at a marine mammal reserve, running boat patrols at Lake Elizabeth (Fremont, CA), and assisting with developing policy related to coastal zones, dredging and navigable waterways at the California Lands Commission. I even had some experience working on wells and spring boxes as a ranger.

My career then took a few twists and turns including spending a decade working as a manager/executive in the correctional system. Even here I interacted with water issues. Every prison essentially runs its own utilities, including water treatment facilities. Think about the recruiting challenges for finding operators in this setting! Sadly, in this role, there was also more than one occasion when I was assigned to work with regulators on corrective action for unpermitted discharges created by overflows from one of our facilities. Your gentle readers most likely do not want to think about the types of things these treatment systems had to manage.

Still, the most direct connection to working in the water resources field came along later in my career after I had left a post in the Governor's Innovation Office, and became the associate director of the Center for Collaborative Policy at California State University Sacramento. It was in this job I was asked to assist with developing the [California Water Plan](#). As background, previous Water Plans (starting in 1952) were primarily add and subtract plans, constructed with math and good engineering. The equation consisted of calculating the amount of water needed, the amount of water available, and the difference between the two. If the answer was a negative number, then the plan prescribed what could be built to make up the difference. However, by the time of the 1998 plan, this approach no longer worked. The definitions of water available and water needed were now a source of contention.

The Plan's diverse stakeholders, including the agricultural, business and environmental communities, all expressed their displeasure and went to the Legislature and Governor, demanding a different kind of plan. My role was to work with the stakeholders and the Plan authors, the Department of Water Resources, to help figure out the options. It took over four years to complete the Plan. With significant stakeholder collaboration and involvement, and extraordinary in scale, it became a strategic plan that considered multiple future scenarios and included resource management options to respond to each. This shift in thinking allowed for consensus on 80% of potential water management actions. The stakeholders learned they largely agreed on many things and the multiple scenarios illustrated strategies that could be utilized to improve outcomes across all the scenarios.

In California, water is always political. This particular plan was completed during the middle of the gubernatorial recall of Gray Davis and installation of Arnold Schwarzenegger as the new Governor. Normally a dramatic change in administrations results in the water policy of a previous Governor being summarily shelved. In this case, the collaborative approach not only improved the Plan content but perhaps as important created a far more politically resilient plan. Stakeholders from both sides of the aisle stood to defend and advance the plan moving forward with very little change.

I am now helping with my fourth update of the Water Plan, to be released in 2018. Significant innovations have included inclusion of additional water management strategies, ranging from Forest Management to Water and Culture. Since that first Water Plan, I have also worked on multiple projects focused on every aspect of water management from flood and groundwater management to canal re-operations, to water reuse.

**And with AWRA?** I became involved in AWRA in 2005 through my work with the California Water Plan. While working on the plan I met Brenda Bateman (AWRA President-elect, see [Brenda's interview](#)) to discuss Oregon's Water Plan. I was then invited to speak on a panel at the AWRA New Orleans Annual Conference. When I got to AWRA I loved it. I loved the policy conversations, I loved the people, all of the disciplines and the work to try and get better policy.

I never felt like I belonged in any of the water associations until I experienced AWRA.

Since that time, I have become involved with AWRA's Policy Committee and the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) work that AWRA has undertaken, served on conference committees, presented at national and specialty conferences and serve on the AWRA Board of Directors. And the rest is history!

**How has the water resources field changed since you started your career?** I think the water resources field has become more collaborative. The field has so much complexity you can't work in silos. You need to work in multiple jurisdictions and disciplines to get quality outcomes. In water there is no one and done, nor any perfect, single answer. It is a continuous process; you can't think of water management as having magic bullet solutions. In the water resources field, you need to manage adaptively and understand that any solution is part of a continuum.

**How will the water resources field change in the next few years?** The water resources profession has fully embraced the concept that we need to manage for climate. This is a game-changer in terms of what we have to do from a physical and policy perspective. Since we have changed the dynamic of what's in the system, we must look at scales differently, and address how to manage all the different parts of the systems. There is not enough slack to manage all of the different parts independently. We also need to step up and start doing a better job with the public. Up until now the water community has believed that the less people hear about you the better. We need to change the relationship with elected officials and the public. They need to know about the need to invest in natural and built infrastructures. The water system is more important than cell phones and prisons yet we have a false understanding of what is a reasonable amount to spend on each.

We will need a completely different mindset about the value of water. It will change the way we live in the world.

**Biggest career success?** My career has mostly focused on helping fix things that are broken. I think one of my most significant contributions related to my first assignment conducting management analysis, while working with the California Youth and Adult Correctional Agency. My manager was not particularly happy that I, a park ranger, was now working in his unit as the decision was made over his head. He was on vacation my first week and a file had been left on my desk with a note that this would be my first week assignment. The assignment was to help the Attorney General's office respond to a federal civil rights contempt order against the State of California for the failure to provide religious services for Native American prisoners. The incarcerated have a constitutional right to practice religion and the state must accommodate these rights. As has often been the case in my career, I had a lot of experiences and knowledge to draw from related to this particular case. I had worked on Native American issues as park ranger, I also went to the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit school, where religion classes are required (and that I thought I would never use), and I have a degree in organizational behavior. To do the assignment I knew I needed population and demographic studies. I found a statistician from the population projections office to work with and came up with a work plan.

On his return from vacation my manager and I were summoned to the Department Director's office. He had a particular interest in the case as he was being held personally in contempt of court. During the meeting my manager told the Director the issue couldn't be resolved (I later learned that there had been two different attempts and failures before the file had been left for me). I was dumbstruck by the announcement and my face must have projected that. The Director asked if I knew what to do and I told

him I had a plan to solve the problem. From that moment on I was assigned to work directly for the Director.

To complete the assignment, I pulled together multiple stakeholders including experts from major religions, formerly incarcerated individuals, and corrections officials. I also pulled together a policy group. We went into 20 different prisons, conducted a religious preferences study, a workload study on religion providers (how priests, ministers, rabbis, imams, etc. actually spend their time each day), an assessment for the process of credentialing Native American spiritual leaders and a study on how many Native Americans are incarcerated and why. Based on the results we were able to establish a formula for staffing services and providing proper implements to conduct services (sage, sweat lodges, etc.) that met the federal requirements and set a national standard. The final result was that incarcerated Native Americans are now able to practice their faith if they choose to. This assignment literally changed people's lives and had a significant national impact. This is just another example of something you can't do by yourself.

Another time I was asked to help design and then co-facilitate a special session at the World Parliament of Religions. Our task was to engage 400 of the world's top faith leaders in a discussion on the obligation of the world's religions to ensure access to safe water. The Parliament was held at the Monserrat Monastery, Spain, a historic site dating from around 880 AD. The stature of the guests doesn't fully dawn on you until the security details and bomb dogs begin to scour the location. During this dialogue the leaders offered over a hundred individual commitments for specific actions to improve water security. As many may know, there is stronger correlation between religious wars and water wars than often discussed.

Most everything important and significant I've accomplished professionally has been because of the willingness of people to sit down and talk.

**Biggest lesson learned in your career?** Collaboration. Get a bunch of smart people in a room and figure it out. It is also important to understand what the rules are. When you come in to work with something that is broken, you must understand the operating rules. The rules should be fundamentally questioned but you need to fully understand the structure of a system before you start to fix it. In many cases you also need to redefine what fixing means.

**Biggest regret?** I think there are things I would have preferred not have learned but that is different than a regret. If anything, I might look at an experience and wonder if I should have said something sooner or intervened sooner or said something else. Yet, you don't have any way of knowing what the outcome would have been so regret is not really part of my focus. That said I've screwed up plenty of things for which I said I'm sorry.

**Share a leadership story?** The topic of leadership is fascinating and our understanding of it is changing rapidly. Over the years I have taught in a variety of leadership programs and am looking forward to the second season of a program for emerging leaders in California's San Francisco-San Joaquin Bay Delta region. One of the goals of the program is to help individuals that live and work in this water rich environment gain collaborative skills and explore the connections of its social, economic and environmental drivers.

One lesson we project throughout the course is that 80% of leadership is about just showing up. We use the Margaret Meade quote, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has," in our recruitment materials. Our secondary messages are around the need to understand the full system and the importance of working with others to accomplish things. This program was modeled after a similar one I helped launch in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

A lot of my personal leadership has been actualized around pioneering new ideas. As an example while working at the Department of Correction there was a huge parole caseload backlog. At the time the use

of video in a courtroom was new and the law about use of technology in legal proceedings still evolving. I had heard one rural court system was using a video system to conduct arraignments since it was logistically difficult and expensive to transport prisoners to court. Once it appeared this activity would withstand legal challenges we explored use of video for parole hearings. It is expensive and time consuming for the Parole Board to travel to multiple locations for hearings and it also required victims that wished to testify to travel (often long distances) and physically enter the prison. My team pioneered a first in the nation video parole hearing process that ended up reducing backlog, workers' compensation claims (from travel associated accidents) and reducing impacts to victims.

I've been fortunate to work on many other groundbreaking projects where we instituted new practices and standards ranging for issuance of new building code requirements for structures in floodplains to one of my current projects that involves helping communities set up governance structures for groundwater management.

**Biggest challenge as a woman in the business?** My career path has always been non-traditional. I was one of the first female park rangers in the state of California. They were not prepared for that and it was not always well-received. For example, there were problems with things that seemed insignificant, for example the women's patches on women's uniforms were smaller (they said it would fit the shirt better) and the front pocket was too small to put a pen in so women had to carry a satchel to hold things. The dress uniform for women was a skirt, imagine working as a park ranger in a skirt! I had to sew my own maternity uniform as no such thing existed before. I ended up active in the union and worked to eliminate a lot of those early barriers so that others do not experience them today. Like many of the others you have interviewed, it was common for almost all of my career to be the only woman in the room. I learned making my voice heard and being taken seriously. I was fortunate to be trained in science and quality management so I could hold my own in technical discussions even if I was not from the same discipline as the other group members. In this case it is important for the people in the room to understand your knowledge is of comparable caliber.

I learned one important lesson while I was in the Police Academy. I was in just the second class that even had women in it. Every day one of the instructors would come in and pick on someone with the intent of finding their vulnerabilities and embarrassing them (those that spent time in boot camp might relate to this). One day I asked the instructor a question and he repeated the question back to me mimicking my voice. I was furious until I realized he had found my vulnerability. This was a huge lesson learned, knowing your weaknesses and vulnerabilities is essential to truly standing your ground.

**One piece of advice you wish someone told you early on in your career?** My career always took a curve here or there. I always felt there was something suspect about it, that there was a set career path that could be followed. In fact, I have more than one job that quite literally didn't even exist when I was a little girl. I wish someone had told me you didn't have to follow a specific path. In the end, everything that has happened has led me to the next thing I've done. It's okay not to have a direct path.

**True inspiration?** There have been so many great leaders and teachers it's hard to name all that have been inspiring. There are people that pioneer ideas, show courage and take stands, stand up for the right thing, and take on battles that are important but not guaranteed to be winnable. Perhaps the unsung heroes should also be called out. I'm inspired by people that go to work every day and do a good job without being thanked.

I am equally inspired by the earth's extraordinary landscapes and vistas. I am so grateful to live in a place where I can experience these things.

*As mentioned, this is the final piece in a five-part series on AWRA's Women in Water. Read the other interviews with Arlene Dietz, Brenda Bateman, Jane Rowan and Carol Collier by searching for Women in Water on this blog. Author Martha Narvaez is AWRA's Immediate Past President. Email: [mcorrozi@UDel.Edu](mailto:mcorrozi@UDel.Edu)*