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Ripples of Memory: Youth, Elders, and Water Stewardship in the Colorado River Indian Tribes

Water governance in the Colorado River Basin is often discussed through legal, ecological, and infrastructural frameworks, yet these approaches frequently overlook Indigenous emotional, cultural, and intergenerational relationships to water. This research explores how community narratives, intergenerational reflections, and personal storytelling can inform culturally grounded and place-based water exhibit design for the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT). Guided by Indigenous research principles of Respect, Relevance, Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Relationality, this study uses a qualitative, mixed-methods approach combining autoethnography and thematic analysis.

Autoethnographic reflection employed the SIBAM model (Sensations, Images, Behaviors, Affect, Meaning) to examine how embodied emotional responses shape understandings of water as a living relation. In addition, twelve interviews collected during a CRIT Water Rights Day event were available for analysis, with five selected for in-depth qualitative coding using MAXQDA. Participants included elders, youth, and community members, and interviews were analyzed for themes of connection, memory, loss, resilience, and generational knowledge gaps.

Findings reveal that water holds both healing and harm for CRIT community members, evoking joy tied to childhood river experiences alongside grief associated with disconnection, uncertainty, and limited intergenerational transmission of water sovereignty knowledge. These emotional narratives provide critical insight for water education and exhibit design, emphasizing the need for storytelling approaches that allow visitors not only to learn about water but to feel its meaning. This work highlights the value of Indigenous-led qualitative methods in informing community-centered environmental education and urban water governance.

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