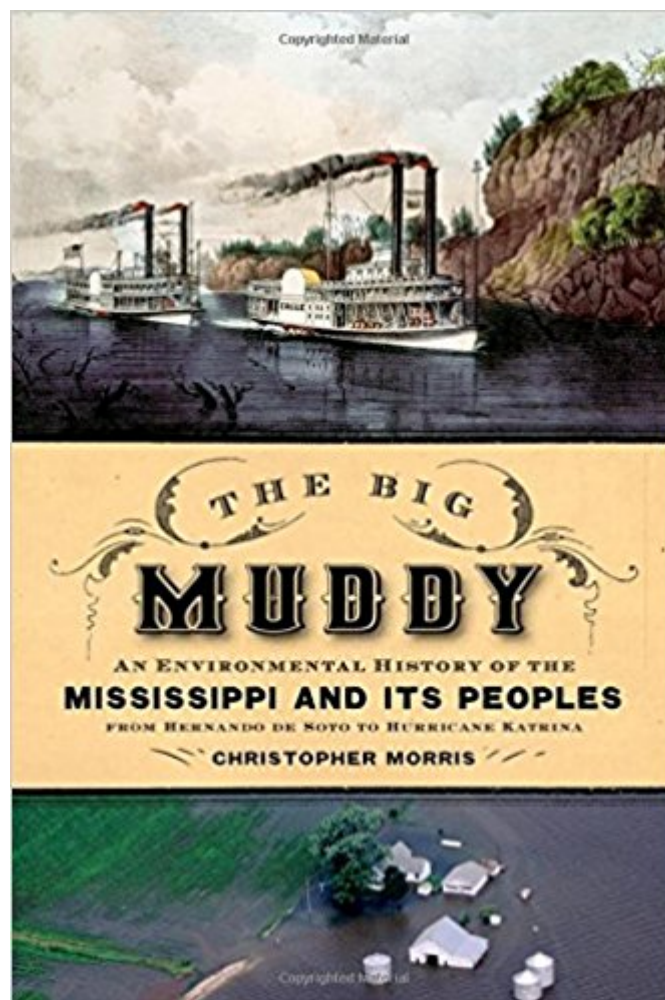




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# The Big Muddy: An Environmental History Of The Mississippi And Its Peoples From Hernando De Soto To Hurricane Katrina



## Synopsis

In *The Big Muddy*, the first long-term environmental history of the Mississippi, Christopher Morris offers a brilliant tour across five centuries as he illuminates the interaction between people and the landscape, from early hunter-gatherer bands to present-day industrial and post-industrial society. Morris shows that when Hernando de Soto arrived at the lower Mississippi Valley, he found an incredibly vast wetland, forty thousand square miles of some of the richest, wettest land in North America, deposited there by the big muddy river that ran through it. But since then much has changed, for the river and for the surrounding valley. Indeed, by the 1890s, the valley was rapidly drying. Morris shows how centuries of increasingly intensified human meddling—including deforestation, swamp drainage, and levee construction—led to drought, disease, and severe flooding. He outlines the damage done by the introduction of foreign species, such as the Argentine nutria, which escaped into the wild and are now busy eating up Louisiana's wetlands. And he critiques the most monumental change in the lower Mississippi Valley—the reconstruction of the river itself, largely under the direction of the Army Corps of Engineers. Valley residents have been paying the price for these human interventions, most visibly with the disaster that followed Hurricane Katrina. Morris also describes how valley residents have been struggling to reinvigorate the valley environment in recent years—such as with the burgeoning catfish and crawfish industries—so that they may once again live off its natural abundance. Morris concludes that the problem with Katrina is the problem with the Rainforest, drought and famine in Africa, and fires and mudslides in California—it is the end result of the ill-considered bending of natural environments to human purposes.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[An] ambitious and cleanly argued environmental history of the lower Mississippi Valley...."

--Historian "The history of the Mississippi valley is the story of a constant tug-of-war between water and land. Morris has aptly told the stories that are often on the margin of the river, and have been on the margin of histories of the valley. In doing this, he has provided much-needed contexts for our endless fascination with the Mississippi River." --Journal of Historical Geography

"Christopher Morris has molded a thoroughly researched, smartly organized, and thoughtfully argued book. ... Morris deploys human stories and graceful prose to maintain the flow, making his an accessible study...

The Big Muddy also comes in a compact size, ideal for adopting for a course, as this reviewer has done." --Journal of American Studies

"Christopher Morris has written an important book that is both history and advocacy. There is much to praise in this book, and it is certain to win acclaim and recognition for its author." --Arkansas Historical Quarterly

"Elegantly written, The Big Muddy is a sweeping environmental history of a famous river told with an eye toward the relationship between water and land." --Journal of American History

"This environmental history of the Mississippi River Valley has a thesis that Morris explores as it relates to different peoples and their technologies, ranging from Native Americans and Spanish and French explorers to current residents in post-Hurricane Katrina times. This is a multidisciplinary history; the extensive endnotes show that Morris did his homework thoroughly. Highly recommended." --CHOICE

"Impressive in its chronological scope, thoughtfully covering five centuries of interactions between people and water, Morris's skilled and subtle work of environmental history shows how river-based ecological systems embed, underwrite, and challenge shore-bound human institutions. Demonstrating the possibility of writing a history of transnational scope while staying in the same place, The Big Muddy follows Spanish, French, and U.S. actors."

--Ohio Valley History "The Big Muddy makes a powerful argument that nature is trying to tell us 'something about the way we understand the natural environment and our place within it.'"

--American Scientist Online "A story as sprawling and powerful as the river it describes. In the wake of 2011's epic flooding, this volume could not be more timely."

--Bill McKibben, author of *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* "Thoroughly researched, tightly written, and uncommonly well illustrated... Morris is at his best here." --Environmental

History "Few authors have so elegantly and succinctly merged human history and natural history as Christopher Morris does in *The Big Muddy*, his environmental history of the Mississippi River.

Eschewing easy answers and simple explanations, he makes clear what is at stake in how humans live in nature." --Richard White, author of *Railroaded* "Chris Morris has written a thoroughly engaging account of human encounters with the Mississippi River. He penetrates and clarifies the complex environmental history of this murky torrent while offering up a flood of fresh insights. As much as any recent history I've seen, this work not only narrates the past, but speaks with a powerful voice to the future of the lower river valley and its inhabitants." --Craig E. Colten, author of *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* "More than any other book written so far, *The Big Muddy* forces us to understand how stubborn efforts to dry wetlands in the Mississippi Valley not only caused vexing environmental problems but also shaped social and economic relationships in troublesome ways. A society plagued by inequality and instability can learn plenty from Christopher Morris's skillful documentation of why we must more wisely adapt to nature's irrepressible mixing of land and water." --Daniel Usner, Vanderbilt University "Christopher Morris's *The Big Muddy* is an extremely important new addition to our ever growing environmental history library. It's a tragic story about how the Mississippi River has been abused for centuries. Morris is a superb researcher and talented writer. Highly recommended!" --Douglas Brinkley, author of *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* "What is remarkable and fresh about this scholarly study of the Mississippi in the longue duree is its comprehensiveness, density, and nuance, as well as the fresh research upon which it is based. It is a sturdy, grand, and at times stunning achievement, deeply rooted in substantial interdisciplinary research and brimming with insight." --American Historical Review

Christopher Morris is Professor of History at the University of Texas at Arlington. He is the author of *Becoming Southern: The Evolution of a Way of Life, Vicksburg and Warren County, Mississippi, 1770-1860*.

While this book presents some decent history, biology, and hydrology, it is VERY opinionated and Very repetitive. Maybe clearly showing your biases is a good thing, but I like reading something that at least tries to be objective. This book repeats over and over (and over) that "separating water and dry land" in the lower Mississippi basin is a futile and "unnatural" activity. While I fully understand the problems with controlling water in a flood plain as large as the lower Mississippi, some measures must have been worthwhile. The only detailed descriptions of the water control measures were those done by the French (yes the French). If the author believes techniques other than those currently in use would make the lower Mississippi basin more habitable and productive (and he

clearly does), he needs to do a much better job of describing what he thinks would work. He needs to present details and costs. While it is clearly true that the current system will repeatedly fail, it is also obvious to any but the most blind. The solutions will require a great deal of thought, research, and money. These are addressed nowhere in this book.

I live in close proximity to the Mississippi River and impacted by it's pollution and it's culture. This book, "The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina" by Christopher Morris, in Kindle format, is an easily used digitally formatted medium to gain a good history and explanation of why the big muddy is now impacted from it's use and abuse by the men who farm near it, float it and change it. If you would like this detailed history of our biggest river's environmental disaster in progress, read Mr. Morris's account of how, over the many decades, we have forever changed this river system for better or worse. Then read of how the Gulf of Mexico is also being damaged.

This book provides an excellent overview of the development (and continuing development) of the lower Mississippi River and Delta. The figures that were included enhanced and illustrate the narrative. The only drawback to the book was that the author has ignored the upper Mississippi River and the rivers that feed into it. The title maybe should have read '...history of the lower Mississippi and its people....' But this is a minor drawback since he did such a good job on the area he covered.

I purchased this book (through , I think) after reading a review in The American Scientist [...] The book seems a bit repetitive in its reading, but was informative and persons interested in the history of the lower Mississippi River region will find it rewarding. I can't improve on the American Scientist review. I also think one should not overlook information from the publisher about a book, e.g. this from the Oxford University Press re The Big Muddy [...]

Despite needing this book for a class, It is a wonderful read, and Morris did a great job giving an entertaining (but factual) telling of the LOWER Mississippi River Valley. Please note, it is just about the lower half of the valley, and it was Morris' editors that changed the title to what it is now.

An engaging read and insightful look at the most important river in America. The author brings together the historical underpinnings of many of today's environmental problems.

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