

CONFLUENCE

SEPTEMBER 2010: CARPE DIEM WELCOMES MATT CLIFFORD
CARPE DIEM PROJECT NEWS



Carpe Diem
WESTERN WATER & CLIMATE CHANGE
A PROJECT OF EXLOCO - PATHFINDING IN THE NEW WEST

[Share this news](#)[Support the Project](#)[Contact us](#)[Print this page](#)

AN INTERVIEW WITH MATT CLIFFORD

Learning to Move Things Forward



"If people really come together,
there tends to be a way. That
really happens."

Q: Can you tell us a bit about your background and how you got involved in water issues?

MC: I grew up in Phoenix in a family where my father was a water rights attorney for the state of Arizona. He represented the fun stuff — Game and Fish, the Parks Department. He would take me with him on these field trips, usually to look at some dam in a remote corner of the state. We'd usually work in some fishing or hunting, and he would talk about what was behind his work, things like how the Salt River used to have water in it. It made me aware at an early age about how important water was.

After college, I realized Arizona was never going to have enough trout for me, so I went to work up in Yellowstone, which is the fishing capital of America, if not the planet. After a couple of years I had state residence in Montana, so I went to law school in Missoula. I knew I wanted to work on water issues, and I had seen enough to know there were different water interests — some doing good things, others not so much — and I wanted to work for the good guys.

At that time, people who wanted to do environmental law could find a lot of work filing lawsuits to stop a development, a mine, a dam. And there were tons of bright-eyed young law school grads wanting to do that. It was good work, important work, but it left me feeling vaguely unsatisfied. It was not exactly focused on finding ways to make things better or asking how we can move things forward.

Q: How did you move from working to stop things to trying to move them forward?

MC: One of my clients was the Clark Fork Coalition. One day I walked into the director's office and said, "Hire me as your staff attorney." And for some reason she did. The day I came on board we launched this incredibly ambitious campaign to get a 100-year-old dam taken out. It wasn't doing anybody any good, but it had 6 million cubic yards of mining waste backed up behind it. Practically everyone thought it would be easiest to just shore the thing up and leave it in place. We slowly pushed, asked agencies to take a harder look, and mounted a public campaign to get people to think about the long-term legacy of leaving the dam there forever. We were eventually able to move the needle of public opinion until it became obvious to everyone — right, left, and center — that the best thing was to take out the dam and put that waste in a more stable place. The EPA received

10,000 comments saying, "please take this dam out." And I thought, Wow! If people really come together, there tends to be a way. That really happens.

A huge part of my work dealt with trying to get restoration on the upper 50 miles of the Clark Fork River, which is the largest Superfund site in the country. The river's been polluted by a century of copper mining, but there's hope. The state got over \$200 million from the mining company that is specifically earmarked for restoration. It was really gratifying to work with the community to get that money spent on projects to restore the river and turn it into an asset, something that was not only beautiful but would help sustain the economy.

Q: What was it about Carpe Diem that made you want to come on board?

MC: Carpe Diem attracted me because it offers a chance to do important work that moves the ball forward. Western water issues are really complicated and divisive. What appeals to me is the chance to reach across divides and bring people from the most diverse possible range of interests to work on the most divisive issues imaginable.

People complain that law school makes people narrow minded, but for me it was just the opposite. I learned to see things from different perspectives. I could see that environmental damage doesn't always happen just because people are evil or greedy, but because they have their own goals and perspectives. And when you realize that, you can start to think about solutions. I see this job as a perfect chance to put my skills to use. It's daunting because the problems are so huge — I mean, what's bigger than climate change? But the flip side is that if you're successful, you can make a real difference.

The [Carpe Diem - Western Water & Climate Change Project](#) is a broad-based network of lead experts, advocates, scientists and decision makers who are addressing the unprecedented challenge of climate change impacts on water resources in the American West. The Project is housed at [Exloco](#), a nonprofit organization with expertise in spotlighting critical issues and facilitating strategic thinking.

[back to page one](#)