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Reflections: Being on Sabbatical During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This is the second *Reflections* on my Spring Semester sabbatical activities. While a sabbatical is intended as a time away from some routine faculty activities, it is not meant to be time off from professional endeavors. Faculty members must receive approval of their planned sabbatical program. My approved sabbatical program was to lecture on topics relevant to my research and Extension work on our region's water issues, for which there is a lot of interest globally. After visiting Singapore in late January (see my previous [Reflections](#)) and Mexico City, my schedule from early March through early July was filled with an interesting mix of presentations in Arizona, elsewhere in the United States, Mexico, Israel, Australia, and France. Obviously, the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the almost complete curtailment of these planned activities. However, even as recently as early March, I had no idea of how this virus would change all of our lives. I write this *Reflections* piece as a mix between a travelogue and a record of just how quickly things changed in a way none of us could have anticipated.

The implications of COVID-19 were just getting press attention when I was in Singapore the week of January 20, 2020. I returned from Singapore on January 25th, the day after the second and third cases there were confirmed. I was there as families were readying for the Lunar New Year, a time of festivities, a break from work, and gatherings and meals with family. Several people there likened the holiday to our Thanksgiving Holiday. There were no major restrictions on travel in late January, so people were pretty much freely traveling, though some were wearing masks, including one flight attendant. Although I had thought our temperatures might be taken when we landed in LAX, they were not. Shortly after returning from Singapore, I traveled to the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City to give a lecture and attend a meeting of the Scientific Committee for a new UNESCO water security center. Few travelers were wearing masks, and the pace of life there seemed normal.

In February, my schedule had me mostly in Arizona, though I did take a personal trip to Los Angeles the last weekend of the month. Planes and restaurants were full, and scheduled large gatherings, such as university basketball games, occurred. I had one full day between my return from Los Angeles and my March 3rd departure for what was intended to be a visit of almost two weeks to Israel. Building upon my [previous work](#) connecting the water challenges of our region to that part of the Middle East, my schedule for Israel included a conference presentation, a lecture and meetings at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, a seminar at Tel Aviv University, and visits with colleagues to discuss ongoing and possible new collaborative efforts. Before departing

from Tucson, I did consider the advisability of traveling so far, as incidences of COVID-19 were increasing. I discovered that Israel had less than 10 confirmed cases, most of which were connected to people who had recently traveled to Italy. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but circumstances did not portend something as serious as what has developed. So, I left as scheduled. My travel and arrival were routine. After checking into my hotel in Tel Aviv, I joined a modest-sized group for a pre-conference dinner the evening of March 4th, where talk focused on the next day's conference, along with local politics. The very interesting one-day conference, Climate Stress and Regional Risks: The Jordan River Basin, went on without a hitch. I spoke about "Wicked Water Problems and Addressing Regional Water Stress". Drawing upon my experience working in our region and the Jordan River Basin, I discussed the importance of functioning mechanisms for cooperation and other factors that facilitate pathways to solutions to our complex water challenges.

Though the conference was held and the rhythm of life in Tel Aviv seemed routine, I carefully followed the news, where I read about possible actions to contain the spread of COVID-19 by limiting travel into Israel. The government started to require Israelis returning from certain COVID-19 hotspots to quarantine at home for 14 days. Restrictions were imposed on flights into Israel from certain locations, including several European countries. I traveled to Jerusalem for the weekend to meet with a colleague and spend some time exploring that wonderful city. However, I was uneasy. Israel was requiring 14-day quarantines of individuals entering from some countries, and the list of countries was growing. More restrictions on entry would translate into restrictions on flights. I wondered if the United Kingdom, my transfer point home, would be added to the list. What spurred me into action on Saturday afternoon, March 7, after only 3 days in the country, was news that the government might impose a quarantine on all travelers from selected U.S. hotspots. Although I was already in Israel, the uncertainty and risks of being stranded became more than I was ready to deal with. So, I got on the phone and rebooked my return for early the next morning. I am pleased to report that my travel home via London and Los Angeles on March 8th was on schedule and my entry into the U.S. at LAX was uneventful.

I share these reflections just before World Water Day, March 22nd. This is usually a time for meetings and dialogues that focus on earth's most vital resource. This year's discussion will occur, but by means, such as webinars, that maintain social distance—including the WRRC Brown Bags. However, all is overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. So much has changed in the short time since I decided to come home. Life is unlike anything most of us have experienced. We do not know what is in our future in terms of our personal and professional activities. I am grateful that I returned when I did, and I was safely at home as the restrictions and guidance associated with the pandemic unfolded. Regarding my sabbatical, be on the lookout for more *Reflections* as I use time at home to reflect and write. As we travel through this experience, I hope you and your families are safe and stay well. And I'm here at smegdal@arizona.edu if you would like to get in touch. My calendar is quite open!

[Wicked Water Problems and Addressing Regional Water Stress \(pdf\)](#)



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