



Maude Barlow

Senior Advisor on Water to the President of the United Nations General Assembly

700-170 Laurier Ave. West, Ottawa, ON, Canada, K1P 5V5 Email: mbarlow@canadians.org

REMARKS TO THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
APRIL 22, 2009

Mr. President d'Escoto Brockmann,

President Evo Morales,

Mr. Leonardo Boff,

Ambassadors and Representatives of Member States, Ladies and Gentlemen,

and a special thanks to Bolivia and the more that 50 Sponsors of the Resolution.

It is my great privilege to share my thoughts and passion today as we honour the Earth, Pachamama, and her people by supporting the Bolivian call for an annual International Mother Earth Day celebration. It is especially moving for me to wholeheartedly support the people of Bolivia in this quest as, under the leadership of President Evo Morales, Bolivia has shown the world what a sustainable and co-operative approach to global political engagement can mean in the face of the clear failure of the politics of unregulated growth and cut-throat competition.

Nowhere has this failure been more evident than in the assault on the finite resources of the planet, most especially its freshwater resources. The water crisis is perhaps the most urgent ecological and human threat of our time and the first – and most devastating – face of climate change. More children die each year of water-borne disease than war, HIV/AIDS and traffic accidents combined. In their recent World Water Development Report, 24 agencies of the United Nations confirmed what those of us working in the field already knew: that the global water crisis is getting worse by the day and threatening millions more people every year.



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The problem is that we humans have seen the Earth and its water resources as something that exists for our benefit and economic advancement rather than as a living ecological system that needs to be safeguarded if it is to survive. We have polluted, diverted and displaced so much water from where it is needed for a healthy hydrologic cycle to function, that whole parts of the planet are drying up. We are just beginning to understand the devastation of this drying to the ecosystem and other species as we humans continue to rob the Earth of the water it needs for survival. The human water footprint surpasses all others and endangers life on Earth itself.

The path to a sustainable water future is difficult but clear. First, water must be seen as a commons that belongs to the Earth and all species alike. It must be declared a public resource that belongs equally to all people, the ecosystem and the future. It must be preserved for all time and practice in law as a public trust and a human right. Clean water must be delivered as a public service, not a profitable commodity. We must efficiently manage our water for the common good, encourage social control mechanisms that put decision-making back in the hands of communities, and always remain vigilant against persistent power inequities. The global North must do far more to unburden the global South from the yoke of debt that prevents many poor countries from fulfilling this obligation. Justice, not charity, must light our way forward.

Second, we need to assert once and for all that access to clean, affordable water is a fundamental human right that must be codified in nation-state law and as a full covenant at the United Nations. A United Nations right to water covenant would set the framework for water as a social and cultural asset and would establish the indispensable legal groundwork for a just system of distribution. It would serve as a common, coherent body of rules for all nations and clarify the right to clean, affordable water for all, regardless of income. A UN right to water covenant would establish once and for all that no one *anywhere* should be allowed to die or forced to watch a beloved child die from dirty water simply because they are poor.

Finally, watersheds must be protected from plunder and we must revitalize wounded water systems with widespread watershed restoration programs. Simply



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put, we must leave enough water in aquifers, rivers and lakes for their ecological health. This must be the priority: the precautionary principle of ecosystem protection must take precedence over commercial demands on these waters. This means that we will have to abandon the “hard path” of large-scale technology – dams, diversions and desalination – in favour of the “soft path” of conservation, rainwater and stormwater harvesting, recycling, alternative energy use, municipal infrastructure investment and local, sustainable food production. Living in and with nature instead of over nature is our path to a water sustainable future.

As a crucial next step, nature must be seen as having inherent rights beyond its use to us. Most Western law has viewed natural resources as the property of humans. We need new laws to regulate human behaviour in order to protect the integrity of the Earth and all species on it from our wanton exploitation. As Martin Luther King said, the law may not change the heart but it will restrain the heartless. Rivers have rights to flow to the sea.

None of us can live on a dry planet. Let us celebrate moving waters on this first United Nations International Mother Earth Day.

Maude Barlow is the Senior Advisor on Water to the President of the UN General Assembly and National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians.