

Water for All

Talkin' About a Commons Revolution

25 Jun 2008 / [Jay Walljasper](#)

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Tags: Blue Mountain Center; Blue Planet Project; Council of Canadians; Grassroots International

The water commons as a concept is easy to understand. And in a time when our planet is threatened by global warming, the importance of the idea is all-too-obvious.

Put simply, the water commons means that water is no one's property; it rightfully belongs to all of humanity and to the earth itself. It is our duty to protect the quality and availability of water for everyone around the planet. This ethic should be the foundation of all decisions made about use of this life-giving resource. Water is not a commodity to be sold or squandered or hoarded.

There are perhaps thousands of campaigns taking place around the planet that draw on shared principles and advance the water commons, although likely not using that language. The water commons (not always in common parlance) can be a powerful, unifying principle drawing together our diverse but inter-related efforts.

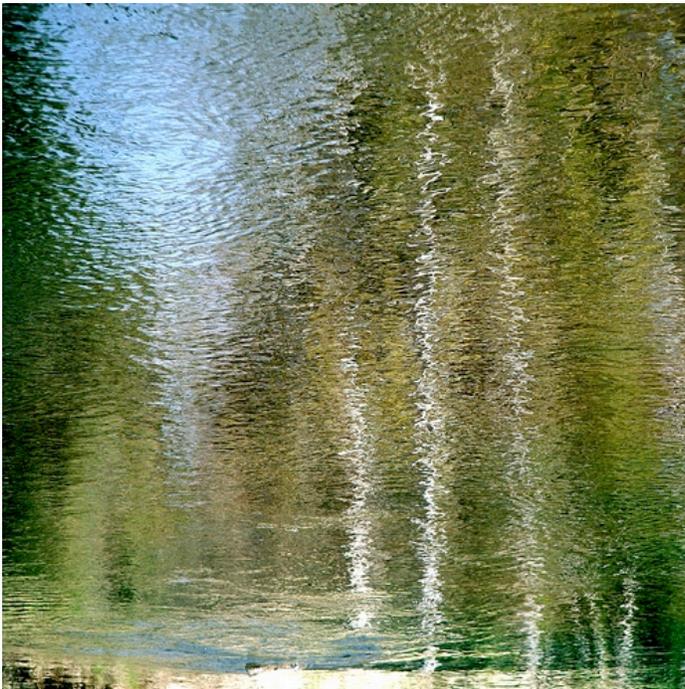


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This is the firm conclusion made by a diverse group of leaders from many fields and nations who gathered in late spring at [Blue Mountain Center](#), amid the lake-dotted Adirondack Mountains of New York State, for a conversation exploring the theme of “Water For All.” Brought together by On the Commons, the [Blue Planet Project](#), and [Grassroots International](#), the group included a public health researcher, an economist, a filmmaker, lawyers, community organizers, authors, professors, NGO directors, and foundation officers from the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Uruguay, Germany and India.

[Maude Barlow](#), prominent Canadian social activist and author of the international bestseller *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop Corporate Theft of the World's Water*, offered a wide-ranging overview of what's at stake from a paper she had specially prepared for the conference.

- It's a well-known fact that one-third of all Africans have no regular access to clean drinking water. But what's not known is that this number is poised to rise to one-half due to increasing pollution and water privatization.
- In the United States, Pentagon officials are already being advised by defense contractors like Lockheed-Martin about securing new sources of water outside American borders—an eerie parallel to the oil politics that has driven U.S. foreign policy for decades.
- The stranglehold that multinational corporations hold on global water supplies has intensified since she published *Blue Gold* six years ago. General Electric is now the largest water company in the world, and many others view the sale of water as a key growth industry for the 21st Century. Bechtel Corporation went so far as to try to charge people in Bolivia for the rainwater that fell upon their roofs.
- The hydrological cycle—the natural process of precipitation and evaporation that governs ecosystems—is being permanently affected as we alter landscapes by damming, draining, paving, deforestation and other large-scale disruptions. This results in severe unintended consequences such as droughts, flood and desertification.
- The global warming crisis is tightly intertwined with water issues but rarely discussed by government panels and NGOs seeking climate change solutions.

“Every human activity now needs to be measured by its impact on water and the water commons,” Maude Barlow declared. “It is a flagrant violation of human rights when only the rich have access to clean water,” she added.

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_Participants at the Water for All meeting at Blue Mountain Center.

Back row: Alberto Villarreal, David Bollier, Julie Ristau, Jay Walljasper, Harriet Barlow, Octavio Rosas Landa, David Mears, V. Suresh, Alan Snitow. *Middle row:* Maude Barlow, Adelaide Gomer, Juliette Majot, Johanna Miller, Cindy Parker, Paula Garcia, Wenonah Hauter, Rajendra Singh. *Front row:* Anil Naidoo, Chuck Collins, Daniel Moss, Ingrid Spiller, James Harkness._

In her wide travels studying and speaking out on these issues, Barlow sees signs of an emerging water commons consciousness. The efforts at this point are largely local, but when added all together she sees potential for a global movement to press claims to water as fundamental right for all.

- Uruguay amended its constitution to recognize the right to water free of charge as a basic principle. Colombia is considering a similar measure.
- A backlash against private operation of public water supplies is growing; it started in South America and has now spread to Africa and even the United States. The World Bank and UN have both been forced to back off from their touting of privatized water as the only way to ensure safe drinking water.
- Norway has refused to fund any further World Bank project that promotes water privatization.

Rajendra Singh, founder of [Tarun Bharat Sangh](#) (TBS, or Young India Association), told a personal and at times very amusing story of his work in Rajasthan, India. Trained as a doctor in traditional Indian Ayurvedic medicine, he had always wanted to be a farmer and soon after university he moved to the Alwyn district to test some ideas he'd long had in his head. The Arvari River had dried up during the 1940s when the surrounding hills had been stripped of trees. It flowed only during the monsoon season. This meant that over the decades people had left the villages to seek a livelihood elsewhere, and when Singh arrived in the early 1980s the area was populated by only the oldest and poorest residents.

Drawing on indigenous Indian knowledge of geology, hydrology and ecology, he began building tiny dams and johads (reservoirs) on streams flowing to the river in the hopes of reviving the natural water flow. The local elders chuckled as they watched him do backbreaking

work with very little results for two years. They then decided he was sincere in trying to help them so offered tips on the right spots to place dams and johads. It worked. Within four years the water captured in the johads during monsoon season was rejuvenating natural vegetation and refilling the aquifers.

The Arvari River now runs all year and people who abandoned the district are now moving back. Villagers are creating their own “river parliaments” to sustain this precious water commons; each is governed by two leaders—one who is responsible to the community, and one who is responsible solely to the water and nature.

“Water is a very emotional, spiritual thing,” Singh explained, noting that the once-lost river is now as sacred to local people—many ask before they die that their ashes be sprinkled into the Arvari rather than the Ganges.

Johanna Miller, outreach director of the [Vermont Natural Resources Council](#), recounted how environmentalists and water activists passed state legislation limiting the amount of groundwater that can be pumped for commercial uses. This was a noteworthy political victory in an era when “property rights” and “takings” still ring across the U.S. as a fierce rallying cry. But Miller noted that the simple question, “Who owns the water?” sent an even more powerful message to many citizens, who showed their support for the bill.

Paula Garcia, executive director of the [New Mexico Acequia Association](#), explained how this centuries-old example of cooperative water management works. Found throughout Latin America, *acequias* are communal irrigation systems shared by dozens or even hundreds of families living along the same stream. In New Mexico, they have been functioning for 400 years and survived many attempts at privatization. Garcia credits the ethic of *querencia*, expressed by many Hispanics and indigenous people in New Mexico, as key to the preservation of the acequia commons. *Querencia* means a deep love for the place where you feel most at home and safe. It’s related to *quere*, the Spanish word for “to want, to desire.”

Octavio Rosas Landa, an economics professor and activist from Mexico City, outlined how many Mexican peasants are losing longstanding water rights as the government aggressively pursues a strategy of clearing peasants from the land in the name of economic progress. Twenty-two million of the country’s 25 million campesinos are targeted, according to Rosas Landa. Control over who gets to use the water is one of the most effective tools wielded by the government and corporations to make this happen.

Cindy Parker, co-director of the [Program on Global Sustainability and Health at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health](#), noted how issues relating to the water commons, and environmental protection in general, get increased attention when discussed as health issues. “It’s still easy for a policymaker to distance themselves from a purely environmental issue. But it is much harder for them to ignore a public health issues.” Health itself is a commons, she said, because everyone has a right to health.

V. Suresh—director of the Rights Research Centre of the Centre for Law, Policy and Human Rights Studies in Chennai, India—surveyed a world where even industrialized nations must respond to water shortages. Australia now places restrictions on washing cars with drinking water and last year London’s mayor banned lawn sprinklers.

The World Bank and other agents of water privatization claim that

their policies promote conservation of the water supply, ease the burden of women (who in traditional cultures often carry water long distances), and expand access to clean water. Yet in reality, the results of water privatization is that poor people are cut off from access to safe water.

Suresh declared there is absolutely no evidence to support claims that water privatization boosts conservation. Cooperative water sharing systems, on the other hand, like those used for generations in Latin America, have a proven track record in preserving scarce water resources. He added that the recent emphasis on technological and free market solutions actually diminishes people's own creativity in addressing these problems. "Fifty years of development have wiped out local knowledge and skills about conserving and cooperating around water."

V. Suresh has effectively organized water utility workers – those often written off as spiritless bureaucrats – in radically reforming Chennai's water utility.

Harriet Barlow, director of Blue Mountain Center—who convened the Water for All meeting with Anil Naidoo of the Blue Planet Project, Daniel Moss of Grassroots International and Julie Ristau of On the Commons—stressed that the point of the gathering was not to launch one more activist organization, but rather to explore something that might look more like a network of networks. "We're already part of many networks and campaigns. We've come here in a state of inquiry. How do we make a water commons revolution?" The stimulating conversation at Blue Mountain Center marks the first step toward that goal.



Canadian activist Maude Barlow and U.S. filmmaker Alan Snitow, both authors of prominent books on the water commons, enjoy a canoe ride on Eagle Lake at Blue Mountain Center in upstate New York.

A sampling of ideas about the commons and about water from the Blue Mountain Center meeting

- Every religion says water is the origin of life. *Rajendra Singh—Founder Tarun Bharat Sangh (Rajasthan, India)*
- You can't simply look at one sector of the commons in isolation. All are interlocking and must be looked at holistically. The water

commons relates to the public service commons, the tax commons, the public health commons, the environment commons. *Harriet Barlow—Senior Fellow, On the Commons*

- The commons is a framework for reconstruction. Until now we have spent more time on resistance than on reconstruction. *Alberto Villarreal—Co-founder, REDES (Social Ecology Network, Uruguay)*
- Why is it so difficult to describe to the world something we know intuitively in our hearts? Commons poets and artists can help us do this. *Juliette Majot—Consultant and former Executive Director of International Rivers*
- The World Bank and other international agencies know how to spend \$1 billion in one place, building a dam, but they do not know how to spend \$1000 in a million places that will make a positive difference by using local resources and knowledge. *Maude Barlow—Chairperson, Council of Canadians*
- In thinking about how legal frameworks can be used to protect the commons, its worthwhile to consider the extent to which the law grew out of local commons and customs. *David Mears—Director, Environmental and Natural Resources Law Clinic at the [Vermont Law School](#)*
- The idea of pricing water did not originate with the environmental movement. It came out of right-wing think tanks in the 1970s. *Wenonah Hauter, Executive Director, [Food and Water Watch](#)*
- Challenging the ownership of water was off the table as a credible mainstream issue for many years, but the framework of the commons is an opportunity to raise it again. *Alan Snitow—Director of the film Thirst and author of the accompanying book Thirst: Fighting the Corporate Theft of Our Water.*
- There is a sense of abundance when we let water follow its natural course. *Jim Harkness—President, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy”:www.iatp.org*
- Two themes that are very helpful in focusing people’s attention on water: Water is a human right. And who owns the water? *Johanna Miller—Outreach Director, Vermont National Resources Council*
- Pete Seeger may well have saved the Hudson River by floating a boat up and down it singing songs. *Harriet Barlow—Senior Fellow, On the Common*
- The commons is a worldview, not an ideology. It allows us to say some things are not for sale. *David Bollier—Fellow, On the Commons*
- Water is a leading edge to understanding the commons. Neither climate nor local food activists have stressed how closely water is linked to these issues. I look forward to opening discussions with those groups. *Chuck Collins—Fellow, On the Commons*
- We are not going to get climate change right unless we look at the role of of water. *Maude Barlow—Chairperson, Council of Canadians*
- A spirit of reciprocity is essential in working with existing groups, including those in the developing world, on water commons issues. *Daniel Moss—Director of Development and Communications, Grassroots International*
- Anil Naidoo noted the word commons does not directly translate into Spanish even though there is likely a greater sense of it in Latin

American countries than the developed world.

- Paula Garcia offered a lyrical Spanish phrase *_una vida buena y sana_*—“a good and wholesome life”—that might loosely translate as commons.
 - Ingrid Spiller of the German [Heinrich Boll Foundation’s Latin American Office](#) noted there is a good equivalent that describes the commons in German, which means nearly the same thing as in English.
 - David Bollier noted that each culture will come up with its own ideas and vernacular language for the commons.
 - The commons is a way of life that respects life. *V. Suresh—Human Rights Lawyer and Director of the Rights Research Centre (Chennai, India)*
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