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Indigenous Perspectives on Water and Development

by David Groenfeldt

The role of indigenous peoples in water planning and policy decisions is becoming increasingly accepted at international fora, although it is still lagging in actual projects and policies. At last year's World Water Forum held in Japan (March 2003), approximately 40 indigenous people participated. Their sponsorship reveals much of the status of indigenous cultural perspectives on water. Some were sponsored by anti-privatization groups that view indigenous leaders as political allies. A number were invited by UNESCO for a session on "Water and Cultural Diversity." Others were invited for a Dutch-financed session on "Indigenous Perspectives on Water and Development" which had three sub-themes: (1) water and spirituality, (2) water rights, and (3) indigenous water management.

Within these few sessions, indigenous participants, including some key leaders (e.g., Evo Morales, head of a 2 million-strong indigenous worker's union in Bolivia) shared perspectives on water development, water rights, and spirituality which contrasted markedly from other views expressed at the Forum.

Indigenous participants drafted a Declaration summarizing their views on water, and articulated a spiritual and moral imperative to defend Mother Earth from the abuses she is incurring from conventional water development.^[1] The Declaration's introduction demonstrates the close connection that indigenous spirituality draws between people and Nature:

1. We, the Indigenous Peoples from all parts of the world assembled here, reaffirm our relationship to Mother Earth and responsibility to future generations to raise our voices in solidarity to speak for the protection of water. We were placed in a sacred manner on this earth, each in our own sacred and traditional lands and territories to care for all of creation and to care for water.
2. We recognize, honor and respect water as sacred and sustains all life. Our traditional knowledge, laws and ways of life teach us to be responsible in caring for this sacred gift

that connects all life.

3. Our relationship with our lands, territories and water is the fundamental physical cultural and spiritual basis for our existence. This relationship to our Mother Earth requires us to conserve our freshwaters and oceans for the survival of present and future generations...

What does the future bode for applying the principles of the Indigenous Declaration to real water policies and management practices in indigenous regions? Several concurrent trends both within indigenous societies and externally within global water policy thinking, are challenging the conventions of "business as usual" water development and point to the possibility – by no means assured – of water policies that genuinely reflect indigenous perspectives.

External conditions favourable to indigenous self-determination in water development were given a boost in November 2000 with the report of the World Commission on Dams which called for "...distinct measures to protect [indigenous] rights. These measures include the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous and tribal peoples to developments that may affect them."[\[2\]](#) This report shifted the paradigm of indigenous complaints about water development from the realm of economic analysis (do benefits to non-indigenous communities downstream outweigh the costs to the indigenous communities who would be disrupted?) to the realm of human rights (the right to remain on traditional lands and, in effect, veto power over dam development that would displace indigenous communities).

A second and still emerging paradigm shift at the level of national water policies is a view of rivers as biological systems as opposed to mere water conveyance systems. The implication, recognized in the new water policies of the European Union, is a water "right" accorded to nature, to maintain biological integrity. While the impetus is economic (a recognition of the economic value of a river's environmental services), the practical effect is similar to the indigenous principle (above) "...to care for all of creation and to care for water."

Internally, within the indigenous world, there are parallel struggles which, although not new, may be influenced by more supportive external conditions. The most obvious trend is that of legal and political activism, using national and international laws, as well as public demonstrations and in extreme cases, armed rebellion, to solidify and even reclaim customary rights to water.[\[3\]](#) A second trend is an appreciation of traditional water management arrangements as having a future and not only a past, comprising a key ingredient in sustainable development practices.[\[4\]](#) A third trend is acknowledging the spiritual dimensions of water and bodies of water (e.g., rivers). A cultural/spiritual view of rivers as live beings, and constituting sacred places, is ubiquitous among indigenous societies, and is very slowly gaining legitimacy as an aspect of native religion and world view that has practical implications for water development.[\[5\]](#)

The concerns of indigenous people for protecting their waters can be met only partly through legal safeguards. The destruction of sacred waters and the demise of traditional knowledge are typically occurring well within legal frameworks; often no laws are broken. Yet water heritage is being lost. The external policy environment has become more favorable to indigenous interests, while internally there is growing awareness about the value of preserving indigenous knowledge and water heritage.

To advance the agenda outlined in the Indigenous Water Declaration, political and legal action will be only the first part of the solution. Once indigenous communities are in control of their water, what models of development will they apply? Indigenous peoples need to debate their water options internally, and to develop an indigenous vision for their water. If this fails to occur, the only alternative will be a reaction to visions formulated by outside water experts and reflecting outside values.

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For further information, see www.indigenouswater.org

[1] The full text of the *Indigenous Peoples' Water Declaration*, along with an overview of indigenous presentations made at the World Water Forum, is available at www.indigenouswater.org.

[2] World Commission on Dams, *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making*, London: Earthscan, 2000 at 216. Available on-line at www.dams.org

[3] For an overview of indigenous efforts to reclaim control of water through legal and political pressure in the Andean region, see the paper by Rutgerd Boelens presented at the World Water Forum: <http://www.indigenouswater.org/user/Boelens-Kyoto%20Paper.pdf>. For insights into armed resistance by indigenous communities in the Philippines, see Bolinget Windel, "Asserting Indigenous Peoples' Rights is Not an Act of Terrorism", *Indigenous Affairs*, (2003) Vol 3

[4] See Groenfeldt D., "Building on Tradition: Indigenous Irrigation Knowledge and Sustainable Development in Asia", *Agriculture and Human Values*, (1991) Vol 8(1-2), 114-120

[5] See Groenfeldt, D., *Water Development and Spiritual Values in Western and Indigenous Societies*; a paper which draws on the presentations made at the World Water Forum, available on-line at: <http://www.indigenouswater.org/user/Water%20Spirituality.pdf>.

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