

Water as Commodity or Commons?

Issues from the 2009 World Water Forum

by Andrew L. Roth

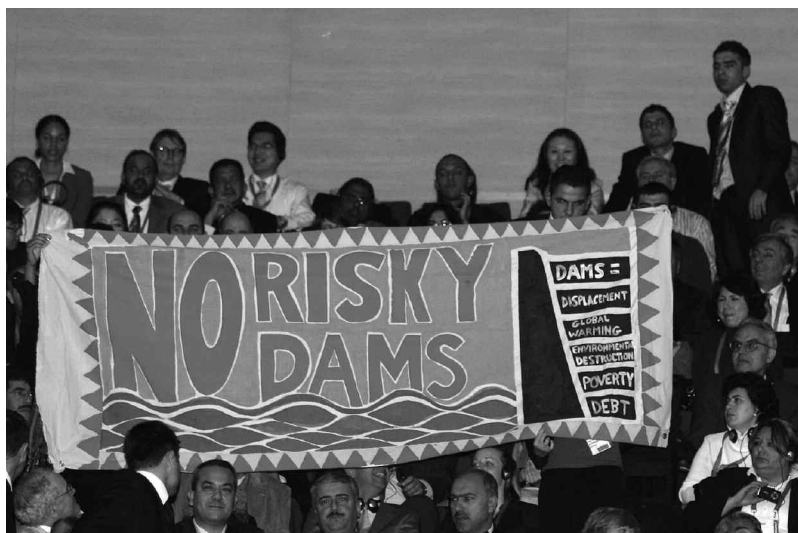
From March 16–22, 2009, the World Water Council (WWC) presented the fifth World Water Forum in Istanbul, Turkey. Boasting participation by over 33,000 people from around the globe, the WWC heralded the Forum as “the world’s biggest ever water-related event.” Nonetheless, as detailed in Chapter 1, the World Water Forum, and its competing Peoples’ Water Forum, ranks prominently among 2008–2009’s most under-reported news stories.

The dearth of US coverage should surprise even the most jaundiced critics of America’s corporate media. At least four episodes from the Forum not only fit conventional definitions of newsworthiness, but also contrasted sharply with the Forum’s declared theme, “Bridging Divides for Water.” Thus, most Americans probably do not know that:

- ▶ Turkish police forces shot water cannons to disperse protesters outside the forum. Water cannons, they subsequently explained, were more cost-effective than tear gas.
- ▶ Though the Forum’s official program heralded “more diverse participation mechanisms,” in Istanbul the World Water Council refused to allow the President of the United Nation’s General Assembly a public audience. President Miguel d’Escoto has been an outspoken critic of water privatization.
- ▶ At the Forum’s inaugural event, two activists representing International Rivers unfurled a banner reading “No Risky Dams” in peaceful protest. Ann Kathrin Schneider and Payal Parekh were immediately detained, arrested and subsequently deported after being charged with “manipulating the public opinion.”¹



Activists at the opening ceremony of the Forum, subsequently arrested for “manipulating public opinion.” GETTY IMAGES



GETTY IMAGES

Of course, since its inception in 1996, the World Water Forum has constituted an ongoing attempt to manipulate public opinion, specifically regarding the desirability, if not the inevitability, of privatized water as both a commodity, and, in the words of the World Water Council’s President, Loïc Fauchon, “a strategic resource.” Though President Fau-

chon has publicly advocated that the “human right to water should be formally, constitutionally recognized in every country across the globe,” his business interests—including his long-standing affiliation with Eaux de Marseille, the subsidiary of two multinational French water corporations—undermine his claim’s credibility.

► Finally, many Americans would be surprised to learn that in Istanbul, the United States joined China and several other countries in opposing a declaration of the right to water. Instead, the Forum concluded that access to water was a “basic need.”

As Maude Barlow, a senior advisor to the President of the UN General Assembly noted, the distinction between a *right* and a *basic need* is not simply semantic: “[Y]ou cannot trade or sell a human right or deny it to someone on the basis of an inability to pay.”²

This chapter aims to remedy the corporate media’s inadequate coverage of the World Water Forum by examining:

- the significance of water control as a means of power;
- the history, organization, and aims of the World Water Council;
- the significance of Turkey as the host site of the fifth World Water Forum; and
- what concerned citizens can do to support alternatives to the WWC and its utilitarian belief of water as nothing more than commodity and strategic resource.

These four themes’ significance stems in part from the fact that, on one hand, according to World Health Organization figures, 1.4 billion people worldwide lack access to clean drinking water, and 2.6 billion lack access to sanitation; and on the other hand, the battle over privatization of water hinges on different conceptions of *accountability*. Advocates of water privatization—including the majority of invited participants in the World Water Forum—ultimately place their faith in markets, and they understand accountability as a matter of *corporate* entities’ responsibilities to their *shareholders*. In this view, water is a *commodity*.

► By contrast, advocates of water as a basic human right seek recognition of water as a *public trust*, so that accountability for its management, delivery, and use ultimately resides in local *communities*. In this view, water is not a *commodity*, but a *commons*, belonging to and equally shared by all.

In *Water Wars*, Vandana Shiva writes, “Water is a commons because it is the ecological basis of all life and because its sustainability and equitable allocation depends on cooperation among community members.”³

UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS IS WATER CONTROL A SOURCE OF POWER?

When World Water Council President Fauchon describes water as a “strategic resource,” he is, to some extent, correct. As Donald Worster and other scholars of water control demonstrate, in arid environments control of water is a source of both economic wealth and political power.⁴ Thus, in *Rivers of Empire* Worster argues that,

Control over water has again and again provided an effective means of consolidating power in human groups—led, that is, to the assertion by some people of power over others. Sometimes that outcome was unforeseen, a result no one really sought but dire necessity seemed to require. In other places and times, the concentration of power within human society that comes from controlling water was a deliberate goal of ambitious individuals, one they pursued even in the face of protest and resistance.

To explain how water control contributes to the consolidation of power, Worster develops the concept of *hydraulic society*, which he defines as “a social order based on the intensive, large-scale manipulation of water and its products in an arid setting.”⁵

Worster then identifies three distinct modes of hydraulic society, defining each mode in terms of its (1) *scale* of water works, (2) managerial *authority*, and (3) *goals*. He characterizes the most developed form of hydraulic society, the “capitalist-state mode,” in terms of:

- large scale, technologically advanced water works;
- ▶ controlled by an “iron-triangle” of bureaucratic planners, elected officials and corporate agriculture;
- ▶ with the aim of “rational, calculating, unlimited accumulation of private wealth.”

This social order is flawed for two fundamental and intertwined reasons, Worster argues. First, the consolidation of power that occurs in

the capitalist-state mode of water control is counter-democratic. Though the iron triangle of elites must contend with one another, overall their rule is resistant to traditional democratic checks and balances. “Democracy cannot survive,” Worster writes, “where technical expertise, accumulated capital, or their combination is allowed to command.”⁶ Second, hydraulic societies risk “environmental vulnerabilities,” including the problems of water quantity, water quality, and the degradation of ecological communities.

For Worster, hydraulic society’s twin threats to democracy and the environment suggest what a sustainable alternative to the capitalist-state mode of water control must look like:

[T]he promotion of democracy, defined as the dispersal of power into as many hands as possible, is a direct and necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, means to achieve ecological stability. . . . [D]espite so much rhetoric to the contrary, one cannot have life both ways—cannot maximize wealth and empire and maximize freedom and democracy too.

Worster’s point about the ultimate incompatibility of wealth and empire, on one hand, and freedom and democracy, on the other, is essential to understanding the World Water Forum and the ambitions of those who created it.

WHAT IS THE WORLD WATER COUNCIL?

Who established the World Water Council? According to the WWC’s website, the Council “was established in 1996 in response to increasing concern from the global community about world water issues.” The passive construction—“was established”—proves significant here. A subsequent page elaborates only somewhat, revealing that the Council was established “on the initiative of renowned water specialists and international organizations.”

Suez and Veolia, two of the world’s largest private water corporations, are accurately described as “water specialists” and “international organizations.” It is not clear from the WWC’s website whether Suez and Veolia created the World Water Council, but a look beneath the surface of the Council’s webpage reveals the extent to which these two corpora-

tions constitute the prime movers of the WWC.⁷ The Council's President, L^oic Fauchon, is also President of Groupe des Eaux de Marseille, which Veolia and a Suez subsidiary jointly own. Compagnie G^onerale des Eaux, a subsidiary of Veolia, has employed the WWC's alternate president, Charles-Louis de Maud'huy, since 1978.

Moreover, the WWC's Board of Governors is composed primarily of individuals and institutions that fit closely with Worster's model of the bureaucratic planners who constitute one third of the ruling iron triangle. The Council's board members represent countries, corporations and organizations that actively promote, and/or stand to benefit financially from, water privatization.⁸

Among the Board of Governors, even Green Cross International (GCI)—an environmental education organization, and the lone board member that *appears* to represent civil society—advocates private financing and management of water according to market principles. GCI's founding president and honorary board member, Mikhail Gorbachev, has publicly stated that corporations are “the only institutions” with the intellectual and financial potential to solve the world's water problems.⁹

The World Water Council has risen to prominence partly by filling a vacuum in governance. In 1947, when the United Nations passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it did not include water as a human right. World leaders did not perceive a human rights dimension to water at the time. As an unintended consequence, water policy today has shifted from “the UN and governments toward institutions and organizations that favor the private water companies and the commodification of water.”¹⁰

However, as Aldo Leopold observed in his famous land ethic essay, ethical criteria evolve over time.¹¹ Leopold advocated an evolving land ethic that would counter a strictly utilitarian conception of land as property by enlarging “the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” In this view,

a system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are (as far as we know) essential to its healthy functioning.

Building on Leopold's ethical vision, Sandra Postel and others advocate the development of a water ethic:

Instead of asking how we can further control and manipulate rivers, lakes, and streams to meet our ever-growing demands, we would ask instead how we can best satisfy human needs while accommodating the ecological requirements of freshwater ecosystems. It would lead us, as well, to deeper questions of human values, in particular how to narrow the wide gap between the haves and have-nots while remaining within the bounds of what a healthy ecosystem can sustain.¹²

Despite Leopold and Postel's eloquence, not to mention the concerted efforts of local communities and the global justice movement, the World Water Council and its supporters continue to promote a market-based, utilitarian approach to the world's water crisis. Perhaps no nation in the world today more clearly exemplifies the extremes of treating water as commodity than Turkey, the host nation of the fifth World Water Forum.

WHY MEET IN TURKEY?

Under the leadership of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the government of Turkey is currently undertaking what may be "the most sweeping water privatization program in the world."¹³ The government not only wants to privatize the nation's drinking water supply and delivery systems, but also the water itself. Such a transformation would be unprecedented in modern history, since the proposal entails the sale of not only the rights to *use of* the water, which has been commonplace since water was first treated as a commodity, but in fact the *water itself*. The conventional legal distinction between rights to use of the water and ownership of the water itself would be overturned by Energy and Natural Resources Minister Hilmi Güler's plan to sell at least a dozen rivers, including the Euphrates and Tigris, to private companies for up to forty-nine years.¹⁴

Officials estimated that privatizing the nation's water would generate \$3 billion in revenues for the government. Notably, in addition to opposition from Turkish agriculturalists, two articles of the national constitution (articles 43 and 168) reserve control of natural resources



and their operating rights to the state. As of the March 2009, the Turkish government has not succeeded in modifying articles 43 and 168 of its constitution to implement sales of the nation's rivers and lakes. Nonetheless, one can imagine that the World Water Council looked favorably on Turkey as a host nation for its 2009 Forum, given the AKP's audacious proposal to sell the nation's water to private corporations.

In addition to the Turkish government's evident support for the World Water Council's privatization agenda, at least four of the ten Forum Sponsors listed in the Istanbul 2009 program are Turkish-based multinational corporations with vested interests in water privatization:

CENGIZ HOLDING, a conglomerate of twelve companies, established in 1987, is currently constructing four major dams with hydroelectric power plants, as well as two additional dams and three irrigation canals in Turkey;

NUROL, a construction conglomerate founded in the 1966, includes dams and hydroelectric power plants, irrigation and drainage systems, and water supply and sewage systems among its infrastructure projects;

BM HOLDING A.S., established in 1972, is now building at least six large-scale dams and/or hydropower plants in Turkey; and

ENERJISA, an electricity provider established in 1996, aims to control ten percent of the Turkish market by 2015; Enerjisa is owned jointly by the Sabanci Group, one of Turkey's leading industrial and financial conglomerates, and Verbund, an Austrian-based hydro-power producer.

A fifth sponsor of the 2009 World Water Forum, GRUNDFOS, is a Danish multi-national that produces water pumps and pumping systems. Each of these five sponsors clearly has business interests in alignment with the World Water Council's agenda.

Finally, Turkey is strategically situated relative to Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Israel, four Middle Eastern states that loom large in contemporary global politics. One recent example will serve to illustrate this point. In April 2009, Iraq's Water Resources Minister, Abdul-Latif Jamal Rasheed, accused Turkey and Iran of contributing to Iraq's growing water shortages. Minister Rasheed blamed dams and reservoirs on the Tigris and Euphrates, both of which originate in Turkey, and called for Iraq to receive a "sufficient and fair share of water" from the rivers.¹⁵

Of course, the 2009 World Water Forum brought together not only a global elite ambitious to consolidate its members' wealth and power by promoting water privatization as the only viable response to the world's water crisis, but also activists intent on challenging this agenda. Those who would concentrate wealth and power by privatizing water met with protest, resistance, and a positive alternative vision in Istanbul.

At the meeting's conclusion, Maude Barlow spoke on behalf of the alternative People's Water Forum, telling *Democracy Now's* Amy Goodman, "It's no longer about the World Water Forum . . . [N]ow it's about us and our vision. The World Water Forum is bankrupt. They're bankrupt of ideas. They're bankrupt of money, frankly. And they have nothing to offer but what's failed . . . It's been a transfer of power."

Advocates of water as a human right will aim to consolidate that transfer of power during the December 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark. Many expect water issues, including the ongoing public-private debate, to feature promi-

nently in Copenhagen, when the world's leaders gather to update the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

If you are reading a chapter about water in *Censored 2010*, chances are you already cast a wary eye on bottled water, take shorter showers, and avoid pouring your used motor oil down the storm drain. So what else can you do to link arms with members of the global justice movement who gathered in Istanbul to resist the privatization of water and to promote the establishment of water as a basic human right? Here are six activities to engage you in the global effort for water justice.

Inform yourself about local and global water issues. In addition to the books cited in this chapter, each of which is worth reading, independent film makers have now produced a number of excellent documentaries on water issues, including:

- ▶ *Flow* (directed by Irena Salina, 2008), <http://www.flowthefilm.com/>.
- ▶ *Thirst* (Alan Snitow & Deborah Kaufman, 2004), <http://www.pbs.org/pov/thirst/> and <http://www.bullfrogfilms.com/catalog/thirst.html>.
- ▶ *Dead in the Water* (Neil Docherty, 2004), <http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/deadinthewater/index.html>.
- ▶ *The Dammed* (Franny Armstrong, 2003; originally titled *Drowned Out*), <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/shows/dammed/index.html> and <http://www.spannerfilms.net/?lid=16>.
- ▶ *Cadillac Desert* (Jon Else, 1997), <http://web.archive.org/web/20030212083841/www.kteh.org/cadillacdesert/home.html>.

Become Watershed Literate. A watershed encompasses all the land surface that collects and drains water to a single exit point.¹⁶ After exploring the length of the Colorado River, in 1890 John Wesley Powell encouraged the US Congress to organize the settlement of the American West on the basis of watersheds, a recommendation Congress ignored.¹⁷ More

than 100 years later, advocates of ecologically sustainable communities are adapting and extending Powell's vision. The Occidental Arts and Ecology Water Institute is one of the leaders in promoting watershed literacy. See <http://oaecwater.org>.

Harvest Rainwater. Turn water scarcity into abundance by learning how to design and implement simple water harvesting systems for the home and yard. As an example of rainwater harvesting's potential, Brad Lancaster calculates that the average annual rainfall for the desert city of Tucson (population approaching one million) exceeds the city's current municipal water use, suggesting that, at least, all residential outdoor water needs could be met by rainwater harvesting, reducing the city's pumping of groundwater and reliance on imported Colorado River water.¹⁸ See <http://www.harvestingrainwater.com/>. And for an immediate, and conscious-changing start, place a bucket in your shower to catch the water flow while you wait for the warm water. Carry the bucket to the yard to water flowers or vegetables.

Advocate for a Clean Water Trust. In the US, urge your congressional representatives to create a Clean Water Trust Fund. Food and Water Watch, a nonprofit consumer organization, challenges corporate control and abuse of food and water. See <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/trust-fund>.

Call for water as a basic human right. Join the grassroots movement for water democracy by urging the United Nations to establish a covenant on the right to water. See <http://www.blueplanetproject.net/> and <http://www.article31.org/>.

Demand better coverage of water issues from corporate media, and support independent media that do provide informative, useful reports. Submit letters to the editor and opinion pieces on water issues, local and global. Give kudos when journalists and news organizations provide good coverage. Keep them honest when they fail to do so.

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Notes

1. For Ann Kathrin Schneider's account see http://www.alternet.org/bloggers/schneider/132725/why_i_was_deported_from_turkey/.
2. Maude Barlow, "Making Water a Human Right," in *Water Consciousness: How We All Have to Change to Protect Our Most Critical Resource*, edited by Tara Lohan (San Francisco: Alternet Books, 2008), p. 181.
3. Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002), p. 24.
4. Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). See also Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*, revised edition (New York: Penguin, 1993).
5. Worster extends Karl Wittfogel's original conception "hydraulic society" as a distinct type of social order. Wittfogel (1896–1988) drew on Karl Marx, Max Weber and the emerging Frankfurt School to understand the relationships among nature, technology, and society. Wittfogel raised the profound question that Worster's study pursues: "How, in the remaking of nature, do we remake ourselves?" (p. 30).
6. Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman reiterate Worster's point: "The concept of democracy itself is being challenged by multinational corporations that see Americans not as citizens, but merely as customers. They don't see government as something of, by, and for the people, but as a market to be entered for profit." Snitow and Kaufman, "The New Corporate Threat to Our Water," in *Water Consciousness*, op cit, p. 45.
7. Jeff Conant's award-winning Alternet reports emphasized the corporate foundations of the World Water Council's leadership.
8. Unfortunately, the WWC website lists the Board of Governors membership for April 2006. Though dated, the available roll call nonetheless provides a clear picture of the Council's driving interests.
9. Barlow, "Making Water a Human Right," *Water Consciousness*, op cit, p. 181.
10. *Ibid*, p. 179.
11. Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," pp. 201–226 in *Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
12. Sandra L. Postel, "Why We Need a Water Ethic," in *Water Consciousness*, op cit, t p. 188. See also Sandra Postel, *Last Oasis: Facing Water Scarcity* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).
13. See, for example, Olivier Hoedeman and Orsan Senalp's "Turkey Plans to Sell Rivers and Lakes to Corporations," Alternet, April 23, 2008, <http://www.alternet.org/story/83304/>. This story should probably have been awarded a Project Censored prize in 2007–2008.
14. See <http://www.globalwaterintel.com/archive/8/9/general/the-puzzle-of-turkish-river-privatisation.html>.
15. "Blackwater bowing out; Va. Firm will protect US diplomats in Iraq," *Arizona Daily Star*, April 2, 2009: A2. Notably the information on the Iraqi minister's complaint against Turkey and Iran was effectively buried at the end of the headline story about the private security firm, Blackwater.
16. Brock Dolman, "Watershed Literacy: Restoring Community and Nature," in *Water Consciousness*, op cit, p. 101.
17. See Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, op cit, pp. 138–143.
18. Brad Lancaster, *Rainwater Harvesting for Drylands and Beyond* (Tucson: Rainsource Press, 2008), pp. 18–19.

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