The Earth’s Water Crisis, Our Water Crisis

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Clean water is a right, enshrined both for humans under the UN World Water Program (though in a still-limited capacity because of politics) and for the earth in Cochabamba’s Rights of Mother Earth Accord.

Canada has been one of the countries that has either blocked or failed to back motions on secure water rights. At the UN Commission on Human Rights in 2002, Canada was the only country to vote against the Right to Drinking Water and Sanitation. In the most recent vote in 2010, Canada abstained.

One of the main reasons for the Canadian government’s unwillingness to enshrine water rights for even its own citizens is its complete failure to provide and ensure clean water for its First Nations communities. In fact, Canada’s record on providing clean water to First Nations communities is both wretched and unforgivable; as the cost to fix the problem is not something any government has wanted to tackle, leaving remote—and thus removed from Ottawa’s concern—communities to suffer the most due to lack of access to clean water and proper sanitation. This is racism in action.

Before contact with the Europeans, First Nations communities were able to rely on natural, local water sources. Now because of corporate interests from mining and logging, infrastructure needs to be built and/or maintained in order to filter the water before its use by First Nations. This is what water rights = human rights refers to.

According to two studies commissioned by Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan and released on July 15, 2011, it has been predicted that Ottawa will need to invest nearly $5 billion in First Nations water and sewage systems over the next 10 years. And that investment is just to keep the water safe for humans.

Duncan promised to introduce legislation to create water and sewage regulations for First Nations reserves after having met with various First Nations communities and other stakeholders. Previous Conservative legislation had been tabled in parliament but faced criticism for failing to provide additional funding for needed upgrades and subsequently died with the 2011 election.

The week after Duncan’s reports were released, the Liberal Party of Canada went on the attack after the government commissioned report found that 40 per cent of water systems on First Nation reserves were found to be at a high risk for failure.

Liberal MP Carolyn Bennett, in her position of Aboriginal Affairs Critic, told an Ottawa news conference that her party would hold the Conservative Party accountable. “While there is a recognized need for a legislative framework for safe drinking water, the government must uphold its duty to work in partnership with [F]irst [N]ations, and more importantly, ensure that the revised legislation is reflective of the concerns raised during the consultation process,” she said.

Meanwhile, the NDP’s Aboriginal Affairs Critic Linda Duncan stated she would prefer that both the Liberal and Conservative parties stop their report releasing and bickering and get down to task to immediately resolve the problem. Looking beyond the reserve, Duncan encouraged the government to look beyond water infrastructure to protecting at its source. “They need to also be looking, not just at the protection of surface water but also of ground water.”

This measure looks to get to the root of the problem by calling for protection for the source water, from which all things drink and the spirits of the water dwell. But this treads into the realm of the environmental protection, not something to which the Conservative government will likely co-operate.

The impact of one of Canada’s worst pollution problems, the tar sands, has been termed by environmental and Indigenous rights activists as, “slow industrial genocide.”

But the Conservative government is relying on the revenues generated through the tar sands to help bolster the economy. Currently, “the tar sands operations produce about 1.5 million barrels of crude oil each day, the majority (97 per cent) of this oil is exported to the U.S. In the next decade, if the government and industry get their way, production is expected to double and reach five million barrels of crude oil each day by 2030,” according to the Pembina Institute.

Despite the results from a September 2010 poll that found that 50 per cent of Canadian believe the risks involved with tar sands projects outweighed the benefits.

Meanwhile, politicians release reports and bicker in Ottawa as people and the planet both suffer.

We risk everything if we see water as only a political issue to be manipulated by parliamentary politics and not something fundamental to the survival of all living things on earth.
We already know how the waters got polluted. We need to ask why did the water get so polluted in the first place?

But ensuring clean water in Canada goes beyond simply looking at the human impact. One thing I dislike about humans is how human-centric humans can be.

Why do we have to tie water rights to our consumption? The earth’s natural resources should not be seen under the lens of human usability and consumption alone. Seeing everything as a commodity also traps us into the identity of consumer as if that is our only role on this planet.

Why can’t the right to clean water be for the water’s sake alone? What about all the plants, animals and Mother Earth herself since we are all related and connected in a circle.

We cannot live in harmony with nature if we place ourselves outside the circle. But that is exactly what we have done when we wantonly pollute the waters of Mother Earth.

Polluting our blood with toxins can cause septicemia and death just as polluting the waters of Mother Earth can cause her illness and death.

I would say [keep] “our” water clean, but it really isn’t ours. Never was. Never will be.

ENDNOTES


NOTES AND DEFINITIONS

UN World Water Program: officially known as The United Nations World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP), the initiative was founded by the UN in 2000 to monitor freshwater. (para. 1)
Cochabamba’s Rights of Mother Earth Accord: an agreement for the protection of ecosystem that was conceived during The World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth near Cochabamba, Bolivia, in April, 2010. (para. 1)

John Duncan: former federal minister of Aboriginal affairs; resigned in February, 2013. (para. 5)

tar sands: a controversial oil development in western Canada. (para. 11)

STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

The article is essentially an editorial that expresses the author’s opinion. The argument is based on the premise that access to clean water is a human right.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Which of the four rhetorical modes (Description, Exposition, Argumentation, and Narration) is the article? Identify the key points and how they function within that rhetorical mode. You might begin by considering the purpose of the article.
2. What is the central thesis in the article? What are its main ideas? Does the author succeed in presenting a unified argument?
3. How might people participate in the protection and preservation of water? Is the preservation of water solely up to the government?
4. Investigate how much water the average Canadian home uses in a day or a year? How does your household compare to the national average?
5. If water was declared to be a basic human right how would governments and aid agencies go about ensuring that everyone on the planet has access to clean water? Begin your research by looking at charitable agencies that work to supply clean drinking water and sanitation.
6. Write a persuasive (or argumentative) letter or essay that argues for the implementation of clean water and sewage systems in First Nations communities in Canada. To whom should the argument be addressed?
7. The author makes the strong statement that poor water conditions in many First Nations communities is “racism in action.” Is this an accurate statement? How might the government’s “failure to provide and ensure clean water for First Nations communities” be seen as racist? If you think the statement is too strong, provide a counterargument.
8. A school of philosophy called Deep Ecology argues that biological systems are valuable in and of themselves and not for what these systems provide to humanity. In Deep Ecology, humanity is seen as another organism with no more rights than any other organism. Conduct research into Deep Ecology to determine whether it is a viable tool for the preservation of nature. Would you consider the author of this article a deep ecologist? Why or why not?