



# A Recovery Plan for Water Is More Important Than Ever

by Maude Barlow

**Twenty-two years ago, the United Nations General Assembly declared March 22 World Water Day. In a world facing a severe and growing water crisis without a road map, this day is more important than ever.**

Our collective abuse of water has caused the planet to enter “a new geologic age” – a “planetary transformation” akin to the retreat of the glaciers more than 11,000 years ago. This is according to 500 renowned scientists brought together in Bonn at the invitation of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in May 2013. A majority of the world’s population lives within 30 miles of water sources that are badly impaired or running out, the scientists said.

The water crisis is also our greatest security threat. This is according to 900 global experts asked to assess the world’s biggest global risks in advance of the World Economic Forum’s annual meeting. Another global study warns that by 2030, demand for water will outstrip supply by 40 per cent. Lack of access to clean water is already by far the greatest killer of children.

While recognized as real, the water crisis is usually seen as a symptom of climate change, itself caused by excessive greenhouse gas emissions. Droughts are almost always reported as the result of climate change. While no doubt greenhouse gas emission-driven climate change does have an important and negative impact on watersheds, warming temperatures and speeding up evaporation, there is another story that needs to be told.

Massive water diversion for flood irrigation and the over-exploitation of groundwater has left large areas of the world without water. The destruction of the Aral Sea and Lake Chad – once the fourth and sixth largest lakes in the world respectively – was not caused by climate change. It was a result of relentless extraction for commodity exports.

The drought crisis in California is not caused by climate change per se, but rather by the massive engineering of the state’s water supplies to provide for a handful of powerful farmers. A huge amount of the state’s water is exported as “virtual water” embedded in export commodities. The Ogallala Aquifer is not being depleted by climate change, but by unrelenting extraction, mostly for corn ethanol.

Removing water from water-retentive landscapes leaves behind parched lands and desertification, another cause of the water crisis. Removing vegetation from water-retentive landscapes changes the water patterns forever. The current crisis in Brazil – once a water-rich country – is largely due to the destruction of the rainforest. Take down the forests and the hydrologic cycle is negatively affected.

Because the water crisis is misdiagnosed, we do not have the right solutions to solve the crisis. World leaders, elected officials and international institutions wrap the water crisis in with their research and deliberations on climate change. If water is mentioned at all, it is as one more victim of climate change, almost always

attributed solely to the burning of fossil fuels. The fact that destroying water-retentive landscapes is a major cause of climate change is not part of the analysis or discussion in climate change circles.

As a consequence, flawed as it is, there is a very serious process to deal with climate change, including an annual climate summit every December and multiple preparatory meetings in between. But there is no corresponding process to deal with the global water crisis.

Water must be addressed as an issue in and of itself. There is an urgent need to create a global recovery plan for water. Key components would include watershed protection, conservation and restoration, and strong local, national and international commitments to put water protection at the heart of all laws and policies, among other things.

Five years ago, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a historic resolution. It recognized water and sanitation as fundamental human rights. It is urgent that the United Nations and world leaders now take the next step toward a water-secure future. They need to commit to creating a global water recovery plan for water that has its own convention, plan of action, and the resources needed to meet the greatest threat of our time.

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