

# Blue Future: A new water ethic

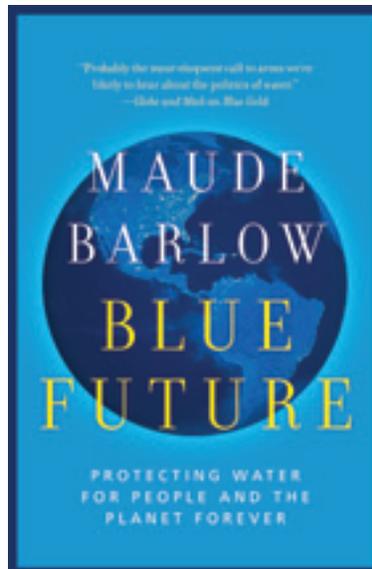
by Maude Barlow

We humans have allowed the planet's fresh water to be used as a resource for the modern world we have built, rather than seeing it as the essential element in a living ecosystem. It seems very clear to me that we need to change our relationship to water, and we need to do it quickly. We need to find out what makes water sick and what makes it well again and to do all in our power to heal and restore the waterways and watersheds of our ecosystems. Not only must we reject the market model for our water future, we must also put ourselves at the service of undoing what we have done to the natural world and hope that it is not too late.

It is time to learn some humility. We must adopt a new water ethic that puts water protection and restoration at the centre of the laws and policies we enact. What would our cities look like if we no longer paved over rivers and streams but instead built around and celebrated them? What would agriculture policy look like if we had laws with teeth (as they do in northern Germany preventing food-producing activities from harming the local water systems? What would trade policy look like if the true costs of virtual water loss were factored into the cost of production? What would energy policy look like if we considered the destruction of fresh water? How would we look at water diversion and dams if we accepted that rivers need to flow to remain healthy?

Conservation is a key component of a water ethic and relatively easy for us to adopt. When my grandchildren turn off the tap as they brush their teeth, I know they are being taught to care for water. The Global Water Policy Project's Sandra Postel, who has been sounding the alarm about water for decades,

says that measures to conserve, recycle, and more efficiently use water have enabled many places to contain their water demands and avoid – even if only temporarily – an ecological reckoning. She notes tried-and-true measures such as thrifty irrigation techniques, water-saving plumbing fixtures, investment in infrastructure to stop water loss through



leaking pipes, native landscaping, and wastewater recycling as cost-effective ways to reduce the amount of water required to grow food, produce material goods, and meet household needs. She adds that the conservation potential of these measures has barely been tapped.

But something is still missing from this prescription, she argues in an essay for the *American Prospect*, something less tangible than low-flow showerheads and drip irrigation. That something has to do with modern society's disconnect from nature and from water's fundamental role as the basis of life. "In our technologically sophisticated world, we no longer grasp the need for the wild river, the blackwater swamp, or even the diversity of species collectively per-

forming nature's work. . . . Overall, we have been quick to assume rights to use water but slow to recognize obligations to preserve and protect it." She says the essence of a water ethic is to make the protection of freshwater ecosystems a central goal in all that we do.

The adoption of such an ethic would shift human activity away from the strictly utilitarian approach to water management towards an integrated, holistic approach that views people and water as interconnected parts of a greater whole. "Instead of asking how we can further control and manipulate rivers, lakes, and streams to meet our ever-growing demands, we would ask how we can best satisfy human needs while accommodating the ecological requirements of freshwater ecosystems," Postel argues. This would lead us to deeper questions of human values, "in particular how to narrow the wide gap between the haves and have-nots within a healthy ecosystem."

Canadian geologist and writer Jamie Linton promotes the concept of the "hydro-social cycle," a process in which flows of water reflect human affairs and human affairs are enlivened by water. "The task, already begun, is to put the hydrosocial cycle to work in helping promote social equity and environmental sustainability not just in cities, but wherever intervention in the hydrologic cycle has produced inequitable or uneven access to water and water services."

This excerpt is from Maude Barlow's new book *Blue Future: Protecting Water for People and the Planet*. Want to help ensure a blue future for us all? Support the Council of Canadians' water campaign by becoming a monthly donor, or by increasing your current monthly donation, and receive a free copy signed by Maude! Contact Dana at 1-800-387-7177 ext 254 or [dchapeskie@canadians.org](mailto:dchapeskie@canadians.org) for more information.