



Maude Barlow asks, 'Whose Water is it, Anyway?' in new book

Maude Barlow has spent her life learning about water and sounding the alarm about what humans are doing to it. She says, "I have never discovered any more powerful truth than this: the world will only be transformed from the bottom up, from people fighting in their own communities because they care."

In her new book *Whose Water is it Anyway? Taking Water Protection Into Public Hands*, she explores how the Blue Communities Project, a grassroots-based campaign, gives people tools they can use to push for the protection of water at the municipal level, ideas she shared on a multi-city book tour this fall. The following text is an excerpt of the book.

"This is a book about hope.

It is a story about everyday people defending the water resources of their

communities and protecting the broader human right to water by ensuring it is now and forever a public trust, one that must not be allowed to fall under private, for-profit control.

It is a story about a grassroots campaign to address the water crisis the world is facing, which counters the argument that the best way to address this crisis is to commodify water and let the market decide who gets access to it and how.

But it is not a story about naïveté. It faces head-on some deeply disturbing realities we must acknowledge if we are to move forward.

In May 2016, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) released the most comprehensive environmental study the United Nations has ever undertaken. Reporting on its study's findings, UNEP called water scarcity the scourge

of the Earth and linked it directly to humanity's continued degradation of the lands and forests that replenish the world's freshwater sources.

In March 2018, UN Water released its annual World Water Development Report with a dire warning: if we do not change our ways, more than five billion people could suffer serious to severe water shortages in 30 years.

Even today 3.6 billion people live in areas that are water scarce for at least a month per year. This could increase to as many as 5.7 billion people by 2050.

On top of these water shortages, there are many parts of the world where accessible, clean water is simply unavailable. An April 2017 report by the World Health Organization warned that at least two billion people worldwide drink water contaminated with feces every day, killing

more than half a million people per year. The UN reports that 80% of wastewater from human activity is still discharged into waterways around the world without any pollution removal at all.

Some lay the blame for this at the feet of climate change. While it is true that human-generated greenhouse gas emissions have affected the water cycle and natural water storage systems, it is equally true that our active, collective abuse of water is another major cause of the world's growing water crisis. Not only are we changing the climate around us as we heat up the world, we are polluting, depleting, damming, over-extracting and diverting the planet's water systems.

Communities already living without clean water because of poverty, inequality and discrimination now find themselves in further danger as local water sources dry up or are claimed for profit-related purposes.

Opposition to the takeover of municipal water services by private transnational water companies has grown, and there are many successful cases where municipalities have returned their water services to public management.

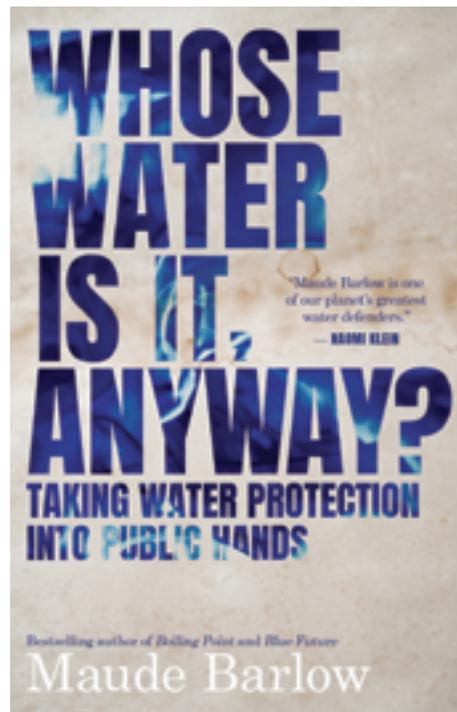
Opposition to bottled water has also increased in the last few years, especially among the young, as people understand the heavy environmental footprint of this industry. And movements such as the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature promote the adoption of legal systems that recognize and enforce nature's own rights.

These are the benchmarks of progress on the macro scale, but there has been equivalent progress on a smaller and more local scale – the rise of the Blue Communities movement. In the last decade, an ever-growing number of municipalities and civil society institutions have designated themselves Blue Communities, committing to defend the human right to water and to help curb plastic contamination in their communities. It is an exciting and hopeful development, a crucial piece of the multi-faceted water-protection

movement that is having real and positive results.

A Blue Community adopts three fundamental principles:

1. A Blue Community promises to protect and promote water and sanitation as human rights. This is in keeping with the United Nations' 2010 resolution declaring that water and sanitation are fundamental human rights and that no one should be denied these services because of an inability to pay.



2. A Blue Community promises to protect water as a public trust by promoting publicly-financed, owned and operated water and wastewater services. All decisions about access to water and sanitation must be made by people and their elected officials, not by a for-profit investor.

3. Where there are accessible clean public water sources available, a Blue Community bans or phases out the sale of bottled water in municipal facilities and at municipal events and promotes its tap water as a safe and reliable source of drinking water. While this step alone will not solve the planet's plastics crisis, it plays an important role in diminishing the devastating environmental footprint of the bottled water industry.

The Blue Communities project started in Canada in 2009 in reaction to the policies of the Conservative government then in power. Claiming that municipalities could save money, the federal government was promoting the privatization of Canadian water services by withholding federal funding to those towns and cities that refused to turn to a public-private partnership (P3) for water infrastructure upgrading.

The Council of Canadians partnered with the Canadian Union of Public Employees and Eau Secours in Quebec to establish the Blue Communities Project as a way of helping municipalities ward off unwanted privatization. To date, 27 Canadian municipalities have taken the Blue Communities pledge. But the concept didn't stay in Canada. Surprising us initially, it started to catch on in other parts of the world: cities such as Bern, Paris, Thessaloniki and Berlin chose to become Blue Communities in highly visible, public ceremonies. Then it spread further. Institutions such as universities, unions and faith-based organizations adopted our principles and have also become Blue Communities, vowing to protect water and the human right to water in a variety of ways.

Many find the concept empowering as it is a positive step forward in the face of the many environmental and human rights threats we now face.

For me, fighting for water justice has been a powerful personal journey. It has taken me from the United Nations and international conferences to the world's most terrible slums in search of the solution to the twin ecological and human water crises that threaten the planet and all living beings. While I deeply believe that we need good and strong law at all levels of government to protect both ecosystems and humans from the coming global water crisis, the most powerful actions we can take personally are at the local level. This book reflects a dream of a world going Blue, one community at a time."

Maude Barlow is a best-selling author, activist and Honorary Chairperson of the Council of Canadians.