

REMARKS FOR BLUE COMMUNITY CEREMONY

MAUDE BARLOW

It is a very great honour to present these Blue Community certificates to Mayor Tschappat of the City of Bern and Rector Tauber of the University of Bern. Yours are the first institutions outside of Canada to choose to become a Blue Community. In so doing, you are taking the pledge to protect the precious freshwater heritage of Switzerland as a public trust for all time and this is a remarkable undertaking.

While it is hard for people in countries like Canada and Switzerland to understand, the planet is running out of accessible clean water. Modern humans have stopped viewing water as the essential element of an ecosystem that gives us all life and instead see it as a resource for our convenience, pleasure and profit. So we dump pollutants into our watersheds, over-extract our rivers to death and pump ancient fossil groundwater faster than nature can replenish it. Rivers no longer reach the ocean; aquifers are running dry; deserts are expanding. Five hundred scientists recently warned that our collective abuse of water has caused the planet to enter a “new geologic age” - a “planetary transformation” not unlike the retreat of the glaciers 11,000 years ago.

The human fallout is immense. More people die of unsafe water than from all forms of violence, including war. A global study confirms that on present course, by 2030, demand for water will outstrip supply by 40% and almost half the world’s population will be living in areas of high water stress. Lack of access to clean water is the greatest human rights issue of our time, and while most pronounced in the global South, is no longer confined there. Austerity measures in Europe and North America have seen cut-offs of water services to those who cannot afford rising rates.

This crisis has spawned a corporate grab to turn our dwindling water supplies into a commodity to be bought and sold on the open market. Private water utilities, water markets and water trading, the bottled water industry and even the private control of whole watersheds, these and other forms of water capture for profit are claiming the water commons of local communities the world over.

People and communities everywhere are claiming back their water commons and asserting that water is a public trust and a human right.

On July 28, 2010, we humans took an evolutionary step forward when the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution recognizing water and sanitation as basic human rights. Access to clean water is now a universal legal entitlement. This resolution was an historic step on the long journey toward global water justice.

In becoming Blue Communities, the City and University of Bern are showing leadership in Europe in asserting that water is a common heritage of humanity and of future generations as well as our own. You are committing to protect the waters of Switzerland as a human right, a public trust and a not-for-profit public service. You take pride in the quality of your public water and remind people of the ecological waste and unnecessary expense of bottled water. It is my fervent hope that your undertaking today will be the beginning of a European-wide movement that will one day reach across the whole world.

Do we have a “Blue Future?” The jury is out on this question. We urgently need a new water ethic that puts the protection of water and the restoration of watersheds at the centre of all our policies and activities. Water is not property to be bought and sold, but rather nature’s gift to us to teach us how to better live with one another and step more lightly on our Mother Earth.

In making this commitment today, you have become part of the solution to the world’s water crisis and I am deeply moved to be part of this historic occasion.