

# A NEW NARRATIVE FOR THE FRESHWATER COMMONS

By Maude Barlow

**T**here are two competing narratives about the earth's freshwater resources being played out in the 21st century. On one side is a powerful clique of decision makers, heads of some powerful states, international trade and financial institutions, and transnational corporations. They do not view water as part of the global Commons or a public trust, but as a commodity to be bought and sold on the open market. On the other side is a global grassroots movement of local communities, the poor, slum dwellers, women, indigenous peoples, peasants and small farmers working with environmentalists, human rights activists, progressive water managers and experts in both the global North and the global South. They see water as a Commons and seek to provide water for all of nature and all humans.

There is a tense – and globally threatening – relationship between these two prominent narratives and ways for the life-affirming water Commons to be used as a framework to bring water justice to all.

## TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE COMMONS

In recent years, some very important work has been done to create a renewed awareness of an ancient concept known as “the Commons.” In most traditional societies, it was assumed that what belonged to one belonged to all. Many indigenous societies to this day cannot conceive of denying a person or a family basic access to food, air, land, water and livelihood. Many modern



societies extended the same concept of universal access to the notion of a social Commons, creating education, health care and social security for all members of the community. Since adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, governments are obliged to protect the human rights, cultural diversity and food security of their citizens.

American Commons pioneer and journalist Jonathan Rowe captures the essence of the concept: “The commons is the vast realm that lies outside of both the economic market and the institutional state, and that all of us typically use without toll or price. The atmosphere and oceans, languages and culture, the stores of human knowledge and wisdom, the informal support systems of community, the peace and quiet we crave, the generic building blocks of life – these are all aspects of the commons.” Noted Canadian environmentalist Richard Bocking says that the Commons are those things to which we have rights just by being a member of the human family: “The air we breathe, the fresh water we drink, the seas, forests, and mountains, the genetic heritage through which all life is transmitted, the diversity of life itself.” Commons is synonymous with community, cooperation and respect for the rights and preferences of others, he adds. Some

Commons, such as the atmosphere, outer space and the oceans, may be thought of as global, while others, such as public spaces, common land, forests, the gene pool and local medicines, are community Commons. “The commons have the quality of always having been there. One generation after another, available to all,” says Rowe.

Many areas once thought to be outside the purview of the market have become fair game; the race is on to, on one hand, capture and profit from the land, genetic, water, mineral and forest resources of the Commons, thus turning these Commons into commodities, and, on the other, to use the air, ocean and freshwater Commons as a dumping ground for waste (thus passing the problems created by the enclosure of the Commons back to the public to live with or clean up). More recently, the social Commons of public health care, universal education and water services have all become targets for large for-profit corporations, backed by powerful global trade and financial institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. These institutions often limit the capacity of governments to regulate and protect the Commons on behalf of their citizens because it is in their interest to open up markets, in the name of economic prosperity, for corporations to grow and compete.

What is needed is a counter-narrative to the current narrative of individual ownership and control as the best way to manage resources. A new narrative, protected by a legal framework of its own, would allow us to manage our collective resources for the common good. This is not an esoteric concept. If we fail to create a new way of thinking about the planet and our role in it, we may not survive.

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