

Maude Barlow Warns United Nations General Assembly About Growing Water Crisis



On April 22, Council of Canadians' National Chairperson Maude Barlow gave her first address to the United Nations General Assembly to support the Bolivian call for an annual "International Mother Earth Day" celebration and to warn members of the threatening world water crisis. Following her address, she met with representatives from 30 UN member countries, providing a personal briefing about water issues and the importance of a UN right to water covenant. Below is an excerpt of her speech.

"It is my great privilege to share my thoughts and passion today as we honour the Earth, Pachamama, and her people by supporting the Bolivian call for an annual International Mother Earth Day celebration. It is especially moving for me to wholeheartedly support the people of Bolivia in this quest as, under the leadership of President Evo Morales, Bolivia has shown the world what a sustainable and co-operative approach to global political engagement can mean in the face of the clear failure of the politics of unregulated growth and cut-throat competition.

Maude Barlow speaks with Father Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, President of the UN General Assembly, in advance of her address to UN delegates about the need for urgent action on the world's water crisis.

"Nowhere has this failure been more evident than in the assault on the finite resources of the planet, most especially its freshwater resources. The water crisis is perhaps the most urgent ecological and human threat of our time and the first – and most devastating – face of climate change. More children die each year of water-borne disease than war, HIV/AIDS and traffic accidents combined. In their recent World Water Development Report, 24 agencies of the United Nations confirmed what those of us working in the field already knew: that the global water crisis is getting worse by the day and threatening millions more people every year.

"The problem is that we humans have seen the Earth and its water resources as something that exists for our benefit and economic advancement rather than as a living ecological system that needs to be safeguarded if it is to survive. We have polluted, diverted and displaced so much water from where it is needed for a healthy hydrologic cycle to function, that whole parts of the planet are drying up. We are just beginning to understand

the devastation of this drying to the ecosystem and other species as we humans continue to rob the Earth of the water it needs for survival. The human water footprint surpasses all others and endangers life on Earth itself.

"The path to a sustainable water future is difficult but clear. First, water must be seen as a commons that belongs to the Earth and all species alike. It must be declared a public resource that belongs equally to all people, the ecosystem and the future. It must be preserved for all time and practice in law as a public trust and a human right. Clean water must be delivered as a public service, not a profitable commodity. We must efficiently manage our water for the common good, encourage social control mechanisms that put decision making back in the hands of communities, and always remain vigilant against persistent power inequities.

"Second, we need to assert once and for all that access to clean, affordable water is a fundamental human right that must be codified in nation-state law and as a full covenant at the United Nations. It would serve as a common, coherent body of rules for all nations and clarify the right to clean, affordable water for all, regardless of income. A UN right to water covenant would establish once and for all that no one anywhere should be allowed to die or forced to watch a beloved child die from dirty water simply because they are poor.

"Finally, watersheds must be protected from plunder and we must revitalize wounded water systems with widespread watershed restoration programs. Simply put, we must leave enough water in aquifers, rivers and lakes for their ecological health.

"As a crucial next step, nature must be seen as having inherent rights beyond its use to us. We need new laws to regulate human behaviour in order to protect the integrity of the Earth and all species on it from our wanton exploitation. As Martin Luther King said, the law may not change the heart but it will restrain the heartless. Rivers have rights to flow to the sea.

"None of us can live on a dry planet. Let us celebrate moving waters on this first United Nations International Mother Earth Day."

Maude Barlow is the Senior Advisor on Water to the President of the UN General Assembly and National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians.