

# Declaration on the Right to Water

## Lesson Plan provided by the Council of Canadians, January 2007

**Suggested Grade level:** 9/10+

**Materials:** Internet Access; RTW Briefing Note; Municipal Declaration

### About the Council of Canadians

Founded in 1985 by a handful of citizens including Farley Mowat, Margaret Atwood, Pierre Berton and Maude Barlow, the Council of Canadians is Canada's pre-eminent public watchdog organization, with thousands of members and over 70 volunteer chapters across the country. The Council works to protect Canadian independence by promoting progressive policies on fair trade, clean water, energy security, public health care, and other issues of social and economic concern to Canadians. For more information, visit [www.canadians.org](http://www.canadians.org).

### Lesson Summary

Water is our most precious gift and is essential to all life. But the world is on the brink of a global water crisis, as scarcity, pollution and globalization mean that more and more people do not have access to clean drinking water.

Here in Canada, there are many threats to our water. Communities across the country have faced shortages, water companies are working to privatize our services, and there is growing pressure to treat water as a commodity and sell it on the open market. Canada is the only country in the world to have voted against the right to water at the United Nations.

This activity introduces students, on a first level and through discussion, to water issues at the local and global level, and to the debate surrounding the right to water. On a second level, students will work together to design a class Declaration on Water, and identify the steps needed to have this declaration accepted by their school.

The objective of this module is threefold:

- To spread awareness of water issues.
- To explain the urgency and need for a Declaration on Water.
- To help build consensus within a class and/or within the school.

This can help students understand the complexities of reaching consensus at a broader political and international level. At the same time, it can help them think about the steps to take to effect change at a local level.

In 2006, Development and Peace, KAIROS and the Council of Canadians worked together to urge towns and cities to adopt a declaration that would mark March 22 as World Water Day and to declare principles for water protection. To date, over 160 municipalities including Toronto, Montreal, Halifax and Calgary have adopted this declaration.

## Process Notes

This is a great tool to build-in qualitative and quantitative research skills and can involve either one class or the entire school community. The declaration can represent the students' vision and the steps a community can take to protect water.

The concepts that can be introduced include human rights, the purpose of declarations, the lobbying process, consensus building, commodification, water privatization, social justice, etc.

**Step 1:** Hold an in-class discussion on the water issues, using the *Key Questions* and *Talking Points* to stimulate discussion. Students will think about some of the causes of the global water crisis and identify the two main opposing views on water: that it is a commodity, or that it is a shared public resource that should be protected and enshrined as a right for everyone. It may be helpful to divide the class into teams to hold a debate.

**Step 2:** The class works together to develop its own Declaration on Water to reflect a common vision of water and how to protect it. You can make your declaration as short or as long as you like. It is recommended to keep your declaration brief to get the maximum number of signatories.

**Step 3:** The class identifies the steps needed to have this declaration passed, including presenting and promoting the declaration to other students to have them sign on, and meeting with the school's key decision-makers.

## Enduring Understanding

It is necessary to highlight a few key points:

- There is a difference between water as a right versus water as a commodity.
- Recognizing the *Right to Water* is a first step toward global water justice.

## Curriculum Notes

Here are examples of how the activity can be extended to bridge various disciplines:

- Language Arts (as a reading and writing exercise).
- Mathematics (as an occasion to survey school population on awareness of water issues and on their ranking of this issue's importance).
- Sciences (as a means to look into hydrological cycles, ecosystems, climate change, geography and earth sciences).
- World Issues (as an opportunity to explore the effects of globalization, activism, culture-jamming, international development, world politics, etc.).

## Extra Incentive

To motivate students to get involved in this activity, it is recommended that you link it to World Water Day (March 22) and launch or publish the declaration on that day. With a bit of planning, teachers and/or students could even contact the local media to generate interest in covering the issue (and publishing the declaration) in the context of World Water Day. The declaration could also be sent to your local Member of Parliament. Of course, the Council of Canadians would love to hear about what your class or school has come up with!

## Key Questions

Teachers can help moderate discussions with some key questions such as:

- What is the difference between treating water as a right versus water as a commodity?
- Why do you think there is a global water crisis and how does it affect different countries around the world?
- What do you think is meant by “water justice,” and what are some steps that can be taken to achieve water justice?
- What kind of agreement do you think should be developed to ensure that the right to water is recognized? What are the advantages or disadvantages of having a regional, national or international agreement? Which should we aim for? Why?
- Why do you think the Canadian government has not yet recognized the right to water?
- What does privatization of water services mean? Can you find any examples in Canada or around the world of privatization?
- What does the right to water mean and what are the implications (socially, politically, environmentally) of enshrining such a right?
- Consider the Millennium Development Goals and how many of them are linked to guaranteed access to clean water for drinking and sanitation.

For some of the answers, teachers can refer to the attached document by Maude Barlow entitled *A UN Convention on the Right to Water: An idea whose time has come*.

## Follow-up Activities

- The class could have their declaration passed for the whole school by lobbying their faculty, principal or school board.
- The students could develop a research process to find out how students in other classes/grades feel about water. They could develop a survey, for example, and students (accompanied by data gatherers/recorders) could survey students of lower grade levels.
- Students can make small presentations on the subject, present a sample declaration and ask others if they would sign it (why, why not and what feedback they could provide).
- The students could arrange to meet with their local government officials, including town councilors, or elected provincial or federal representatives.

# SAMPLE WATER DECLARATION (Municipal)

**WHEREAS** March 22 is World Water Day; and

**WHEREAS** one in six people around the world does not have access to clean drinking water; and

**WHEREAS** the UN Conference on Water in 1977 in Mar del Plata affirmed the right of all persons to access clean drinking water in order to satisfy their fundamental needs; and

**WHEREAS** current World Bank loans for water services in developing countries frequently require the privatization of those services or an increase in water prices, thereby jeopardizing citizens' access to safe drinking water;

**AND WHEREAS** the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives and the Council of Canadians have asked Canadian municipalities to assist in their effort to have the federal government recognize water as a common good and access to drinking water as a basic human right;

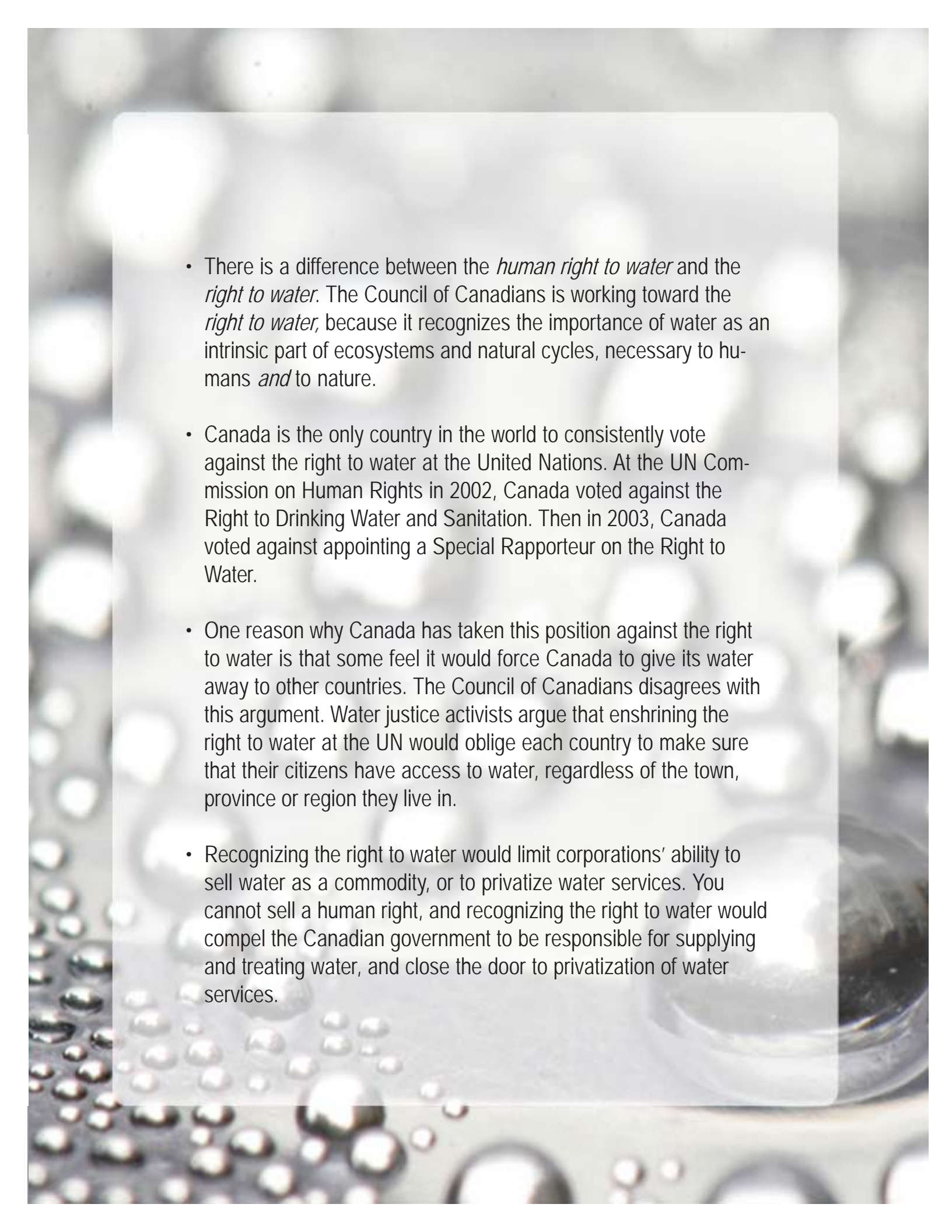
**THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** that this Council recognizes and affirms that:

- Water is a sacred gift that connects all life.
- Access to clean water is a fundamental right.
- The value of Earth's fresh water to the common good takes priority over any possible commercial value.
- Fresh water is a sacred legacy, a public trust and a collective responsibility; and

**FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED** that this Council call upon the federal government to urge the World Bank to ensure access to clean, affordable water for the world's poor, and strengthen the role of the public sector and individual communities in setting water policies and delivering and regulating water services.

# Teacher's Talking Points

- 1.2 billion people do not have access to clean drinking water. Over 2 million people, mostly children, die yearly from water born diseases such as diarrhea and cholera. Global water corporations see this looming crisis as an opportunity to cash in – by diverting, bottling and privatizing the world's water. In the global south, international financial institutions work in tandem with water corporations to suck lakes, rivers and aquifers dry, only to bottle the water, and sell it back to people.
- At the time that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was developed, the right to water was not included in the declaration's articles, as it was assumed that everyone would always have access to safe, plentiful drinking water. The same was assumed for air. But due to population explosion, privatization, unequal access to and distribution of water, climate change and pollution, water is not a guaranteed resource.
- Today, there is no international treaty on the right to water, but global movements in the defence of water are working toward this goal.
- Recognizing the right to water in the form of an international treaty is only one step in promoting and guaranteeing access to water around the planet. A common recognition of water as a right will give strength to local groups fighting abuses by corporations, and help to hold governments accountable for providing drinking water for all.

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- There is a difference between the *human right to water* and the *right to water*. The Council of Canadians is working toward the *right to water*, because it recognizes the importance of water as an intrinsic part of ecosystems and natural cycles, necessary to humans *and* to nature.
  - Canada is the only country in the world to consistently vote against the right to water at the United Nations. At the UN Commission on Human Rights in 2002, Canada voted against the Right to Drinking Water and Sanitation. Then in 2003, Canada voted against appointing a Special Rapporteur on the Right to Water.
  - One reason why Canada has taken this position against the right to water is that some feel it would force Canada to give its water away to other countries. The Council of Canadians disagrees with this argument. Water justice activists argue that enshrining the right to water at the UN would oblige each country to make sure that their citizens have access to water, regardless of the town, province or region they live in.
  - Recognizing the right to water would limit corporations' ability to sell water as a commodity, or to privatize water services. You cannot sell a human right, and recognizing the right to water would compel the Canadian government to be responsible for supplying and treating water, and close the door to privatization of water services.