

SPEAKING NOTES FOR THE MARY DONALDSON LECTURE,
SASKATCHEWAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION ANNUAL MEETING
APRIL 30, 2009

It is my great pleasure to present the 2009 Mary Donaldson Lecture on this lovely spring evening in Saskatoon. Mary Donaldson was a beloved Saskatchewan librarian once described as a “determined dauntless and cheerful small woman whose energy was out of all proportion to her physical status.” This description could be a metaphor for libraries, whose quiet presence in all our communities belies their incredible impact in disseminating information, ideas and dreams to countless people in our country and around the world.

Did you know:

- * One in six people around the world regularly use a library?
- There are over a million libraries worldwide served by almost 700,000 librarians?
- These libraries hold books and electronic assets of over one trillion dollars?
- The inventory of the 14,000 Canadian libraries is five times larger than those of Indigo Books?
- Nine times more Canadians visit a public library every year than attend a performance or a production?
- Canadian libraries were the early leaders in electronic books?

I want to speak tonight about a global crisis – the global water crisis – but want strongly to acknowledge that libraries have helped disseminate the information I am going to share with you to millions around the world. Public libraries are a common asset of citizens, much like water, and this aspect of belonging to everyone and serving everyone links the two in a very special way.

The Crisis

Suddenly it is so clear: the world is running out of clean water. This information contradicts what we all learned in school, which was that there is a finite hydrologic cycle and we cannot run out of water, no matter how much we use or waste. But what our teachers did not know and could not teach us was that in a few short decades, humans would create a freshwater demand that far outstrips the earth's supply.

How is this possible?

- We are polluting massive amounts of surface and even ground water, rendering it inaccessible to us.
- As a result we are over extracting our rivers to death, mostly for flood irrigation and to grow crops in deserts, creating more desert.
- We move water from where it supports a healthy hydrologic cycle and ship it away from watersheds embedded in commodity exports.
- We mine groundwater far faster than nature can replace it and ship it to mega-cities, which dump it into the ocean instead of returning it to the watershed.
- We pave over water-retentive landscape, negatively affecting the hydrologic cycle and reducing rainfall on land.

By these actions, humans are emptying aquifers and watersheds, perhaps permanently. This means that whole areas of the world may be drying out, *not* experiencing what many incorrectly describe as “cyclical drought.” One scientist calls them “hot stains;” they include Northern China, most of India and Pakistan, the Middle East, twenty-two countries in Africa (where every one of the 677 major lakes is imperilled), Southern Europe, Mexico City, which is sinking, and the American Southwest, where the Colorado River is in “catastrophic decline” and Lake Mead, the man-made backup reservoir that would “never” run out of water has only a twelve year supply left.

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.

Close to two billion people now live in water-stressed parts of the planet and almost three billion have no running water within a kilometre of their homes. The global population tripled in the twentieth century, but water consumption jumped sevenfold. By 2025, unless we dramatically change our ways, two thirds of the population will face water scarcity and by 2050, we will need an 80 % increase in water supplies just to feed ourselves. No one knows where this water is going to come from.

The global water crisis is taking a terrible toll on the world's most vulnerable people. Contaminated water is implicated in 85% of all sickness and disease in the Third World. In the last decade, the number of city dwellers without access to clean water increased by more than sixty million. By 2030, more than half the population of these huge urban centres will be slum dwellers with no access to clean water or sanitation whatever. In Mumbai India, there is an example of a toilet that serves 5,440 people.

More children die of water-borne disease than war, HIV/AIDS and traffic accidents together. In the last decade, the number of children who died of diarrhoea exceeded the number of people killed in all the armed conflicts since the Second World War. Every eight seconds a child dies from dirty water.

Tragically the world community has been inexplicably slow in confronting this crisis and has only introduced stopgap measures at best. And most countries have yet to properly confront their own water crisis in a systematic way in order to prepare their citizens for the changes to come.

The Canadian Situation

Here in Canada, we have taken our freshwater supplies for granted, but the time for complacency is over. In a world running out of fresh water Canada will be looked to for leadership and so far, we have little of that to offer. We have not revised our national water policy in 40 years. We have not mapped our groundwater supplies and have no idea of their sustainability. The Great Lakes are polluted and being drawn down faster than recharge can replenish them. Lake Winnipeg is very sick. The Athabaska's very existence is imperilled by the unrestrained water takings in the production of heavy oil in the Alberta tar sands. A leaked environment Canada memo said that Canada has a "looming freshwater crisis," but that no one is minding the store.

We also have 1,300 melting glaciers, everyone due for total melt. The British science journal *Nature* notes that Calgary, Edmonton and Saskatoon are all at risk of losing the very rivers up on which they were built. Yet the Harper government has no plans to combat global warming. While drinking water standards in our cities is safe and regulated, the state of drinking water on First Nations communities is a travesty for such a wealthy country. Further, the federal government does not enforce the Fisheries Act; half the mining operations in Canada are in violation of the act. Successive governments have gutted the freshwater protection laws and now Canada is trying to backtrack on its commitment to monitor freshwater sites around the world for the UN through GEMS – the Global Environment Monitoring System.

It is also important to remember that we live next to a very thirsty superpower running out of water in several key areas of the country. Yet Canada signed the North American Free Trade Agreement, which includes water as a tradable good, meaning that if any province starts the commercial export of its water, the government will not have the right to turn off the tap; and as an investment, meaning that the big American energy companies operating in the tar sands have prior rights to the water they use for energy production. Canada has no mechanism in place to protect our water from commercial sale to fill the swimming pools and water the golf courses of Las Vegas.

And unbelievably, the Canadian government does not support the right to water at the United Nations.

The Way Ahead Globally

The solutions to the global water crisis could be based on three “practical principles:”

1) Water as a Commons

One of the fiercest disputes in the world is who gets to make allocation decisions over the world’s dwindling water supply. Is water a commodity to be put on the open market for sale like running shoes or Coca Cola or is it part of the heritage of all humans and other species to be protected as a commons for the future? Who will determine who has access, a locally elected council or the CEO of a transnational corporation in another

country? Will we allow the creation of “water banks” where water is traded on the open market to those who can pay? Who will protect the needs of those who cannot?

I strongly believe that water is a commons and a public trust that must be declared to belong to the citizens of every community and to the ecosystem and the future. While both the public and private sectors can access water, no one owns it; rather it belongs to all. This does not mean that water access should be a free-for-all, We need to have highly managed water systems that protect water at every stage of use based on a set of priorities. Nor does it mean that there is no commercial dimension to water. Clearly water is used in the production of everything from food to cars. However, the private sector should not be able to determine the allocation of water; that is the role of government and local communities. If water is seen as a market commodity, those who can pay will have preferential access and nature will be further plundered for its declining water supplies.

Water belongs to all living beings and is part of our global heritage.

2) Equitable Access to Water

The second practical principle is that everyone has the right to clean safe water regardless of ability to pay. The answer to the current inequitable access to water is water justice, not charity. Millions of people live in countries that cannot provide clean water to their citizens as they are burdened by their debt to the global North. At least 62 countries need deep debt relief if the daily deaths of thousands of children are to end. As a result, poor countries are forced to exploit both their people and their resources, like water, to pay their debt. As well, foreign aid in many northern countries falls far below the recommended .7 percent of GDP.

To deal with the water crisis in the South, we must cancel or deeply cut the debt, substantively increase foreign aid, fund public services, and invest in water reclamation programs to protect source water. UNDP estimates that it would cost less than \$14 billion to meet the Millennium Development Goals on water and sanitation, a pittance compared to the recent bank and industry bailouts that have been announced in many wealthy countries. We should also promote a tax on financial speculation; even a modest tax could pay for every public hospital, school and water utility in the global South. And we must challenge the devotion of so many leaders to unlimited growth, which

has left countless millions in its wake. We need to create a whole new set of rules for global trade based on sustainability, cooperation, environmental stewardship and fair labour standards.

The equitable access to water should also be enshrined once and for all in a United Nations covenant and in nation-state constitutions. A United Nations right to water covenant would set the framework for water as a social and cultural asset and would establish the indispensable legal groundwork for a just system of distribution. 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.

3) Watershed Restoration

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. This must be the priority: the precautionary principle of ecosystem protection must take precedence over commercial demands on these waters. This means that we will have to abandon the “hard path” of large-scale technology - dams, diversion and desalination - in favour of the “soft path” of conservation, rainwater and storm water harvesting, recycling, alternative energy use, municipal infrastructure investment and local, sustainable food production. Living in and with nature instead of over nature is our path to a water sustainable future.

As a crucial next step, nature must be seen as having inherent rights beyond its use to us. Most Western law has viewed natural resources as the property of humans. 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. Rivers have rights to flow to the sea. We, none of us, can live on a dry planet.

The Way Ahead in Canada

A number of non-governmental organizations, including the Council of Canadians, have been calling for a national water strategy to protect Canada’s freshwater resources, both ecologically and jurisdictionally, based

on the principles articulated above. To be effective, this strategy would have to include all levels of government, federal, provincial and First Nations, and have lots of public input.

Its core principles should include: water as a human right; water as a public trust; water as a public (not private) service; and water as a sovereign responsibility to protect.

Core elements should include:

- Watershed management and restoration;
- National drinking water standards;
- Groundwater mapping and protection;
- An assessment of the viability of the virtual water being used in commodity exports;
- Enforcement of the Fisheries Act;
- Strict enforcement of strict laws against polluters;
- A serious climate change policy;
- Protection of mountain habitat (the source of 50% of our water);
- Sustainable food production policies;
- Taxation to reflect the real environmental cost of commercial water extraction;
- A moratorium on new production in the tar sands;
- The removal water as a good and an investment from NAFTA;
- A ban on the commercial export of Canada's water;
- A high level emergency colloquium on the Great Lakes;

- Strategies to reduce/eliminate bottled water consumption and a re-investment in public water infrastructure;
- Re-investment in research and scientific oversight of our freshwater supplies;
- Adoption of the public trust doctrine to oversee our surface and groundwater sources as a commons;
- Renewed commitment to the GEMS program with sufficient funding;
- Support for the right to water at the United Nations.

Importantly, Canada needs to adopt a soft water policy path, whereby we plan our economy around our water budget instead of planning for massive growth and then trying to find the resources to accommodate this growth. Such a policy would likely mean a new emphasis on local food production and manufacturing, and more sustainable living in every aspect of our lives.

Our water heritage is worth preserving. Let us hope we are up to the task.

Maude Barlow is the National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians and Senior Advisor on Water to the President of the UN General Assembly. Her newest book is *Blue Covenant, The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water*.