

# WATER FOR ALL



The water commons as a concept is easy to understand. And in a time when our planet is threatened by global warming, the importance of the idea is all-too-obvious.

Put simply, the water commons means that water is no one's property; it rightfully belongs to all of humanity and to the earth itself. It is our duty to protect the quality and availability of water for everyone around the planet. This ethic should be the foundation of all decisions made about use of this life-giving resource. Water is not a commodity to be sold or squandered or hoarded.

There are perhaps thousands of campaigns taking place around the planet that draw on shared principles and advance the water commons, although likely not using that language. The water commons (not always in common parlance) can be a powerful, unifying principle drawing together our diverse but inter-related efforts.

This is the firm conclusion made by a diverse group of leaders from many fields and nations who gathered in late spring at Blue Mountain Center, amid the lake-dotted Adirondack Mountains of New York State, for a conversation exploring the theme of “Water for All.” Brought together by On the Commons, the Blue Planet Project, and Grassroots International, the group included a public health researcher, an economist, a filmmaker, lawyers, community organizers, authors, professors, NGO directors, and foundation officers from the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Uruguay, Germany and India.

Maude Barlow, prominent Canadian social activist and author of the international bestseller *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop Corporate Theft of the World’s Water*, offered a wide-ranging overview of what’s at stake from a paper she had specially prepared for the conference.

- It’s a well-known fact that one-third of all Africans have no regular access to clean drinking water. But what’s not known is that this number is poised to rise to one-half due to increasing pollution and water privatization.
- In the United States, Pentagon officials are already being advised by defense contractors like Lockheed-Martin about securing new sources of water outside American borders—an eerie parallel to the oil politics that has driven U.S. foreign policy for decades.

- The stranglehold that multinational corporations hold on global water supplies has intensified since she published *Blue Gold* six years ago. General Electric is now the largest water company in the world, and many others view the sale of water as a key growth industry for the 21st Century. Bechtel Corporation went so far as to try to charge people in Bolivia for the rainwater that fell upon their roofs.
- The hydrological cycle—the natural process of precipitation and evaporation that governs ecosystems—is being permanently affected as we alter landscapes by damming, draining, paving, deforestation and other large-scale disruptions. This results in severe unintended consequences such as droughts, flood and desertification.
- The global warming crisis is tightly intertwined with water issues but rarely discussed by government panels and NGOs seeking climate change solutions.

“Every human activity now needs to be measured by its impact on water and the water commons,” Maude Barlow declared. “It is a flagrant violation of human rights when only the rich have access to clean water,” she added.



*Participants at the Water for All meeting at Blue Mountain Center.*

In her wide travels studying and speaking out on these issues, Barlow sees signs of an emerging water commons consciousness. The efforts at this point are largely local, but when added all together she sees potential for a global movement to press claims to water as fundamental right for all.

- Uruguay amended its constitution to recognize the right to water free of charge as a basic principle. Colombia is considering a similar measure.
- A backlash against private operation of public water supplies is growing; it started in South America and has now spread to Africa and even the United States. The World Bank and UN have both been forced to back off from their touting of privatized water as the only way to ensure safe drinking water.
- Norway has refused to fund any further World Bank project that promotes water privatization.

Source: <http://www.onthecommons.org/water-all-0>