

RECLAIMING WATER AS A COMMONS



It's not so unusual to see water stories topping the news these days. Even when that news is very bad, that's very good news indeed. The stories are frequently troubling; they should be. Climate change is increasing the ferocity of floods and droughts and water privatization is drowning our democracy. But it's about time that the seamy details of how we manage our water commons see the light of day.

Water binds all of nature and humanity together in one big (ailing) ecosystem. In our current legal framework, future generations of people and animals have a hard time getting their voices heard about how water ought to be managed with their health in mind. Public debates are essential. Recent articles on the public health disaster of sewage overflows, California's new water barons and India's watershed stewards inspire both head-banging outrage and hopeful ways forward.

In a recent National Geographic article Crispino Lobo of India's Watershed Organization Trust (WOTR), describes basic steps for watershed repair. By constructing earthen dams and terraces, the WOTR slows down water so that it can be absorbed into the ground rather than wash away the soil. "Where the rain runs, we make it walk; where it walks, we make it crawl," explained Mr. Lobo. Groundwater reserves are in turn recharged. "If people are able to improve the land and restore the soil," Lobo said. "You start seeing a change in how they see themselves." Imagine the ecological and spiritual remediation, not to mention staggering economic savings, when our watershed management practices follow this simple advice.

WOTR's work is a close cousin to that of Rajendra Singh's, the rain gatherer, whose work is described in a series of case studies entitled "Local Control and Management of Our Water Commons: Stories of Rising to the Challenge," compiled by Our Water Commons The Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) movement with which Rajendra works in arid Rajasthan has constructed similar dirt dams called *johads* and reforested the Alwar region's watersheds. Just as ecology would predict, flow has returned to the area's rivers as has groundwater availability.

While the WOTR and TBS stories might make water justice dreams seem within reach, Yasha Levine in *How Limousine Liberals, Water Oligarchs and Even Sean Hannity Are Hijacking Our Water Supply*, tells a story that gets your bile boiling.

In the mid 90s, behind closed doors, a large underground water reservoir in Southern California was privatized and became the property of the Kern County Water Bank, an entity principally owned by billionaires Stewart and Lynda Resnick. These Beverly Hills “farmers” also own Paramount Agribusiness and Fiji Water. Levine reports that, “After the water enters the Kern County Water Bank, it stops being a public resource that could otherwise be used to irrigate crops locally.”

Lubricating the deal was the creation of a “paper water” trading mechanism, a crazy Wall Street-type instrument not terribly different than those economy-exploding mortgage-backed securities. Paper water ended up fueling much of Southern California’s subdivision sprawl, satisfying developers’ requirements to show that water existed to satisfy families’ household needs even when there was no real water.

The Resnicks have added to their nearly \$2 billion fortune by selling publicly subsidized water back to the state at a very nice profit.

This modern-day horror story is beautifully reported in Levine's story as well as in Public Citizen's report, *Water Heist: How Corporations Are Cashing in on California's Water*. The Public Citizen report recommends sensible steps to manage California's water as a commons: return the Kern County Water Bank to public control, banish the paper water market, and ensure citizen oversight of water and irrigation districts.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the country, Brooklyn's sewage system overflows after just a 20 minute rain. Urbanization and sprawl has paved over so much earth that rain waters end up in storm sewers rather than reabsorbed in the ground. The old infrastructure just can't handle the surge. Nationwide, such overflows result in 20 million water-borne illnesses each year. So tells an excellent report in the *New York Times*, *Sewers at Capacity, Waste Poisons Waterways*, part of a series entitled *Toxic Waters: A series about the worsening pollution in American waters and regulators*.

New York City officials warn that it would cost \$58 billion to upgrade systems so that the overflows won't occur, raising water and sewage bills by 80 percent. Is that a scare tactic, a feeble excuse not to do the work or just uncreative officials talking? I have no reason to believe the price tag is incorrect, but what about some imagination here with pro-environmental and pro-equity payment schemes?

The article provides some terrific ideas — requiring parking lots to include landscaped areas to absorb rainwater and requiring porous pavement on sidewalks and roads. And what about pursuing more conventional policies like raising development taxes to pay for water infrastructure and cross-subsidizing rates?

Hmm, create jobs through upgrading antiquated sewer systems, restore ailing watersheds through the patient and persistent participation of community organizations or privatize our most precious liquid in a convoluted wealth-fare scandal? Readers are smart; I say bring the stories on and watch citizens water activism grows like a well-watered corn stalk. The grassroots revolt reclaiming our water commons won't be far behind.

Source: <http://www.onthecommons.org/reclaiming-water-commons>