

Boundless Waters

When we pollute and deplete our streams and rivers, we also imperil our coastal waters.

“The health of our waters,” wrote ecologist and author Luna Leopold, “is the principal measure of how we live on the land.” Of no waters is this truer than our coastal waters, which are the recipients of—and more poignantly, the receptacles for—all the activities contained in the watersheds and waterways that feed them.

The long journey to the sea begins in distant headwaters. As small streams become large rivers, they accumulate more and more of the refuse of human activities—sediment and run-off, nutrients and pollutants—that are discarded onto the land and discharged into the water. Rivers are the great sewer lines of our civilization. So, when a dead zone the size of New Jersey surfaces in the Gulf of Mexico, it speaks to a big plumbing problem on the Mississippi River.

We are destroying our coastal zones, moreover, not only because of what we are putting into our rivers, but also because of what we are taking out of them—namely, their water. In a world where entrepreneurs see wasted opportunity in water pouring “unused” into the ocean, it is no accident that increasing numbers of rivers no longer run to the sea. There are fortunes to be made, and there is no end of ideas for how to make them.

Some are very big ideas. In the water-rich land of Canada, the environmental crusader Maude Barlow has been warning for years about wild schemes to move massive amounts of water across great distances—projects such as the GRAND Canal (for “Great Recycling and Northern Development”), which would reverse the north-flowing waters of Hudson Bay and send them through a 167-mile canal into the Great Lakes and on to the lower 48 states; and plans for the production of massive sealed bags filled with hundreds of millions of gallons of water that tugboats will haul around the globe. These and other schemes have yet to be realized, but private enterprises already transport water in staggering volumes. Annual worldwide sales of bottled water, for example, exceed 65 trillion gallons. And similar amounts of water are extracted for industrial uses, such as the production of the 28 billion pounds of beef that Americans eat each year, which requires 70 trillion gallons of water.

The current consumption, extraction and diversion of water—let alone what is proposed for the future—are wreaking havoc on our streams, rivers and aquifers...and on our

coastal zones. We are over pumping our groundwater and depleting our rivers. Those that do make it to the ocean deliver a fraction of the water that they once did, and the diminished amount that does trickle through is too often salty, dirty, even poisonous.... the primary source of expanding dead zones from Chesapeake Bay to the Baltic Sea.

This toxic process derives from two assumptions. The first is that water is a commodity, like pork bellies or petroleum, and can be mined and sold for profit in the marketplace. The second is that people have the right to take water from the places where it originates and transport it to places where it is scarce, or at least where other people will pay a premium for it.

That water can and should be extracted from the ground or diverted from the streambed, and either stored or transported somewhere else for human benefit, is an idea that dates back to the first irrigation ditches and the earliest portable vessels. But in today's world, it is also an idea that will spell disaster if it spurs us to build more and bigger dams, make deserts bloom, and otherwise pursue growth without limit.

Because water is *not* like pork bellies or petroleum. You cannot live without it – nothing can. It is this critical distinction that is leading many activists to oppose the designation of water as a commodity, to fight against its privatization, and to claim that access to clean, fresh water is a universal human right. There are compelling reasons to do so. One is that the United Nations forecasts that 2.8 billion people will be without adequate water by 2025. Another is that, under free-trade agreements such as NAFTA, if water is deemed a commodity, governments will be unable to protect it from corporate exploitation.

The declaration of water as a human right, however, raises a difficult question of its own: What is the obligation of water-rich states to people in other countries whose lives are imperiled by water shortages or contamination? Will Canada—which has been called “the Saudi Arabia of fresh water”—have an obligation to share its water with nations that do not have enough? This is a question of justice. How do we ensure that people everywhere have access to a natural resource on which their lives depend?

However these questions are answered, we can begin to resolve our dilemma by thinking in terms of ecosystems, rather than often arbitrary lines drawn on a map. This means viewing water within the context of its watershed. A river system, from its headwaters to its

mouth, is a single ecosystem—a continuum—that is constantly striving toward a state of equilibrium. Downstream life depends on upstream health, and all life in the system is interdependent. There is no such thing as a surplus.

We must realize that massive human intervention changes ecosystems in radical, probably irreversible and perhaps fatal ways, that water is increasingly scarce and unevenly distributed. And we must set priorities about its use.

Only when we understand that our claim to stewardship is asserted not solely for human benefit, but as our responsibility to the entire earth, will we create a context within which to make decisions about the equitable distribution of water and the protection of its sources. And only then will our rivers run clearly to our seas, and life return to the dead zones that they have injected into our coastal waters.

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