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The Second [Women's Congress for Future Generations](#) will convene in Minneapolis, MN on November 7-9. The gathering builds and extends on the Congress held in Moab, Utah in September 2012. Attendees of the Moab Congress drafted a *living Declaration of the Rights of Future Generations (and corresponding Bill of Responsibilities of Present Generations)*.

The goal of the Minneapolis Congress is to infuse the working draft of the Declaration with an even deeper analysis of the intertwined issues of environmental and economic injustice, and [to attempt putting the principles of the Declaration into action](#).

The other focus of the Minneapolis Congress will be water.

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I like to read about the places to which I travel. Given the theme of this Congress, I focused my reading on the regions' water and economic systems. Several points caught my attention:

Minneapolis sits about 250 miles below the headwaters of the Mississippi River on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabe and the Dakota. Its twin city, St. Paul, is just downriver, near the confluence of the Mississippi with the Minnesota and the Saint Croix.

Roughly forty-two percent of Minneapolis residents identify as people of color. The city is home to one of the largest urban indigenous populations in the nation and is the birthplace of the American Indian Movement. A sizable immigrant and refugee population also has settled in the area.

Minneapolis hosts a vibrant cultural and civic life, with an active environmental justice community.<sup>i</sup>

Minneapolis and St. Paul are one of many metropolitan centers of the Great Lakes basin—the largest interconnected fresh water system in the world. These waters, for the past hundred years, have served as shipping channels and waste receptacles for the steel, manufacturing, and petrochemical industries that grew along their shores.

Sometimes called a [megalopolis](#), the Great Lakes region consists of [three dozen](#) population and manufacturing centers. Its networked economy has been one [of the largest and most productive in the world](#).

But parts of the Great Lakes region also overlap with the post-industrial Rust Belt. The region has borne the brunt of globalization, de-industrialization and the more recent downturn in manufacturing and the US economy.

The recession has had, according to the Twin Cities Peoples Agreement on Climate Change, [“an unprecedented impact on the cities’ indigenous and communities of color.”](#) These effects are economic, but they also can compound the experience of extant and shifting environmental conditions. The coming changes, including future extreme weather events, will only exacerbate structural disparities already present in housing and transportation.

Within the past five years, Minneapolis already has faced flooding and drought.

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I still rely on the grade school mnemonic device to name the Great Lakes: H-O-M-E-S.

Huron. Ontario. Michigan. Eerie. Superior.

HOMES, indeed. [Fifty-five million people](#) and [3500 species of plants and animals](#) reside in the Great Lakes basin.

If one were to traverse the shoreline of all five lakes, it would be about the same distance as walking halfway around the world.

The [Mother Earth Water Walkers](#) did just that. In 2003, a group of Anishinaabe men and women walked around Lake Superior. A year later, they walked around Lake Michigan, followed by Lake Huron (2005), Lake Ontario (2006) and Lake Erie (2007).

Then, Mother Earth Water Walker and executive director of the Indigenous Peoples’ Task Force in Minneapolis, Sharon Day (Ojibwe), was one of five women who traversed the length of the Mississippi on foot. Along the way, they carried water from the river’s source at Lake Itasca to its mouth at the deadzone of the Gulf of Mexico.

The Mississippi River, over its 2000+ miles, drains the vast low-lands that lie between the Rockies and Appalachian Mountains. Second to the Ohio River, the Mississippi is one of the most heavily [polluted waterways in the country](#).

[Eighteen million](#) people—and an unknowable number of wildlife—rely on the Mississippi for drinking water.

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There are several dozen chemical hot-spots throughout the Great Lakes region, a struggling watershed plagued by uneven distribution of environmental problems.

Love Canal is one.

Another example is the industrialized city of Sarnia near Detroit. Sarnia is located in southern Ontario, where Lake Huron flows into the St. Clair River. Sarnia hosts forty percent of Canada's total petrochemical production. It is also the long-time home of the First Nation (Anishinaabe) community of Aamjiwnaang. Industry now encloses Aamjiwnaang on three sides. The community reports [an entire generation of lost boys](#). Only one in three live births is a boy, where one would expect the number of male to female babies to be roughly equal.

In fact, [the endocrine disruptor hypothesis](#), which explains, in part, how chemicals interfere reproduction, was developed by [Dr. Theo Colburn from studies conducted of unhealthy and dwindling populations of Great Lakes wildlife](#).

Water, soil, sediment and fish samples taken from the Great Lakes watershed tell a story about the regions' industrial presence and past, and of chemicals that persist long after their production has ceased: DDT, PCBs, perfluorinated compounds, and several formulations of PBDEs (once-popular flame retardants added to furnishings and electronics) have all been found in the Great Lakes system. In fact, perfluorinated chemicals such as PFOS and PFOA, used to make durable water-grease- and stain-repellant products like ScotchGuard and Teflon, used to be made on the banks of the Mississippi by Minnesota Mining & Manufacturing, now 3M. That legacy will be measurable for some time in the river and in the bodies of all species who depend on it.

Theo Colburn also taught me that [we are only four, maybe five, generations into an economy—and culture—built around molecules, like flame retardants, that are synthesized from extracted oil and gas products](#).

I take this to mean: what *is* hasn't always been.

And also that the Great Lakes have taught us a very important lesson about our place in the world.

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That lesson is this:

We are a way station in the great cycling of water.

Water becomes bodies, becomes sperm.

It becomes the blood shed by miscarriage, and the tears of a mourning woman.

It becomes amniotic fluid, becomes cord blood becomes the body of the next generation.

Water becomes the sweat of labor, becomes milk.

Whatever water carries, it carries to and through us.

Whatever is done to water is done to us.

The violence committed through water wounds some more than others.

But whatever is done to some of us is done to all of us.

The story of water is the story of us.

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We now monitor blood as we monitor water.

An [enormous scientific apparatus tracks pollution in the Great Lakes](#) and the region's many rivers. The [US government also regularly inventories a suite of chemicals in a representative sample of the American population](#).

Through biological monitoring of human blood, fat and other tissues, we've learned how we all embody the chemical innovations of the age in which we live. It is part of the legacy now passed from parent to child. A class of flame retardant chemicals called PBDEs are found in the blood of most Americans. They are [ubiquitous in the Great Lakes ecosystem](#), even though some formulations have been phased-out of production. One of the US manufacturers of PBDEs had been the Great Lakes Chemical Company (now Chemtura).

It is also true that some communities bear heavier chemical burdens than others—for example fenceline communities in industrial corridors, and those communities that rely on wild foods, like Great Lakes fish, for subsistence. This is a significant issue for many indigenous communities, writes anthropologist Elizabeth Hoover (Mi'kmaq/Mohawk), who face the [impossible choice to follow fish consumption advisories or consume contaminated, yet culturally-essential \(and economically-viable\) foods](#). And then there are the [receptor communities of the circumpolar](#)

[North](#), who find themselves living at the terminus of the long-range transport of persistent pollutants from more heavily industrialized lower latitudes. Martha Cone has called this [“the greatest environmental injustice ever perpetrated.”](#)

The Clean Water Act was passed in 1972. It was the federal response to decades of polluted, urban, industrial rivers. One precipitating event that inspired passage of the Act happened in 1969, [when a section of Cleveland’s Cuyahoga River, which feeds Lake Erie, caught fire again, as it had many times before.](#)

There is no blood equivalent of the Clean Water Act.

Blood, like water, ought to flow free of the pollutants we’ve put into it.

Economists say that industry externalizes the cost of pollution. The people are often left to pay when the bill comes due for environmental clean-up, remediation, monitoring and health care. Given what social scientists have documented about the unjust distribution of polluting industries in low-income areas and near communities of color, illness and lost work days impose yet another set of costs disproportionately levied against communities already struggling to get by.

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*Science* magazine recently published a study about the origin of water, which concluded that about half of [Earth’s water predates the formation of our solar system](#). Put differently, the Earth inherited water from elsewhere in the Universe. I’d taken to thinking of water as ancient, and I marvel at how the very molecules of water I drink with my coffee may have once slaked the thirst of a dinosaur. But given that all the water in the world is all the water there will ever be, that very same molecule of water I am now consuming will be what some future being—centuries, maybe millennia from now—needs for survival, too.

But, as ecologist and SEHN Board Member Emeritus Sandra Steingraber recently wrote, the fast-growing fracking industry, [for the first time in human history, is now removing water from Earth’s water cycle.](#)

And what water that industry returns to the surface after it bores beneath the bedrock, it [renders unsafe for human consumption or agriculture.](#)

Access to water is a human right, acknowledged by:

[The People’s Agreement on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth](#) (signed in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2010).

[The United Nations.](#)

[The Principles of Environmental Justice \(1991\)](#)

And by [the Declaration of the Rights of Future Generations](#) drafted in Moab, Utah (2012).

Too often that right is violated.

This is the situation now unfolding in Detroit, another city in the Great Lakes region. There, [officials raised water rates and then shut off drinking water to residents who couldn't make payments](#).

The privatization of water and climatic changes have —and will continue to— alter access to diminishing supplies of potable water, and will press already vulnerable communities to the brink.

Water access is and will be among the paramount justice issues of this generation, and those to follow.

SEHN Executive Director Carolyn Raffensperger —whose bold thinking served as [headwaters to these Women's Congresses](#)—made the observation that we often use water as a metaphor to explain economics. Trickle-down economics. Cash flow. Rain check. We talk about how money dries up; that we need to shore up our finances and weather credit droughts. We flood markets. Assets can be liquid, or frozen. To buy time, we ask to be floated. To be underwater is to be in debt.

Water, however, is unpredictable, perhaps now more than ever. The seas are rising. California rivers are running dry.

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I wonder what will come of the dialogues to be had in Minneapolis at the confluence of water and economic justice.

There are also water metaphors that inform how we think about community organizing and social change. We speak of rising tides and shifting tides, and tides that lift all boats. There are groundswells and waves of protest. We put faith in the possibility that small changes set off ripple effects or that water carries —even amplifies— voices. And, however accommodating, water eventually channels through stone.

Minneapolis, then, seems like a fitting host city.

[Transforming what is into what ought to be, wrote Scott Russell Sanders, like Aldo Leopold before him](#), is one of the great challenges of social and environmental change. I am inspired by the number of women rising to this challenge.

I am going to the Women's Congress because I want to leave an alternate environmental legacy, to learn from experiences different from mine, and to listen to how women (in particular) move from an understanding of what *is* and what *ought to be* into a state of *becoming*. On behalf of SEHN, I invite you to participate, too.

Join us in Minneapolis on November 7. [Learn more and register here.](#)

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<sup>i</sup> For those interested in further reading about the Minneapolis/St. Paul community:

A [mapping tool to make Minneapolis's environmental justice issues more visible](#).

Work to address the way environmental problems both reflect and deepen racial and economic disparities, including in the [city's planning for climate change](#).

[Vote to displace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day on the civic calendar](#).

And the push for novel [cumulative impact assessments](#) before new facilities are permitted to operate in an already overburdened community.