

# **Report on the March 2003 World Water Forum Kyoto, Japan**

## **Sessions on *Indigenous Perspectives on Water and Development*<sup>1</sup>**

This note gives an overview of indigenous peoples' activities within the World Water Forum, and specifically reports on two sessions organized by Wageningen University, CRLE, and Tebtebba Foundation, with funding from the Government of The Netherlands. This report covers three phases of activity: (1) Preparatory meeting held on March 14 and 15, just prior to the official start of the Forum, (2) The formal indigenous sessions held on March 16 and 17, and (3) The indigenous caucus sessions held during the subsequent days of the Forum.

### **1. Preparatory Meeting (March 14 and 15)**

The Water Forum Secretariat had arranged for meeting space in downtown Kyoto, some distance outside the Forum Conference Center. About 15 people were present on March 14 morning, and this number increased to about 25 by the following afternoon. The meeting was co-chaired by Tebtebba Foundation (Vicky Corpuz and Joji Carino) and the Indigenous Environmental Network (Tom Goldtooth). A Spanish interpreter, arranged by Tebtebba and paid through the WALIR grant, provided whispered translation throughout the two-day preparatory meeting, for the Spanish speakers in the group.

Discussion focused on three main sets of issues: (1) sharing experience about water and expectations among the participants, (2) the nature of the Water Forum and the organizations behind it, and (3) reaching consensus about what the indigenous group should try to accomplish during the Forum. The participants found a great deal in common in terms of their struggle to gain control over water within their regions and in the clash of worldviews between the indigenous/spiritual perspective and the colonial/materialist perspective. The group came to a very natural consensus on what their input should be to the Water Forum: an indigenous declaration on water, which would help them clarify their position both to themselves (and to their communities back home), and to the water professionals attending the Forum and the global public at large. This declaration, which was finalized during the Forum, is available in both an English and a Spanish version on our website ([www.indigenouswater.org](http://www.indigenouswater.org)).

### **2. Water Forum Sessions on Indigenous Water (March 16 and 17, 2003)**

Two formal sessions were organized under our project: (1) Indigenous World Views and Spirituality and (2) Indigenous Water Vision and Rights. Both sessions were presented on March 17 and formed a part of the "Water and Cultural Diversity" theme coordinated by UNESCO and the French Water Academy. Indigenous speakers also took part in the

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<sup>1</sup>This note has been prepared by David Groenfeldt, and is a personal account of the sessions. It does not necessarily reflect the views of any of the sponsoring organizations.

opening plenary for the "Water and Cultural Diversity" theme on March 16.

**Opening Plenary Session** (March 16). Three indigenous speakers were included in the opening session: (1) Eva Morales from Bolivia, who was invited by Fundacion Solon, gave an impassioned speech about the struggle that indigenous people face in gaining recognition of their rights and respect for their cultural way of life. (2) Jeannette Armstrong from Canada (Okanagan/Syilix Nation) presented a spiritual message that "Water is as sacred as life itself" and reminded us that our actions today impact all the life forms of the future. (3) Roimata Minhinnick from New Zealand (Maori) presented Maori perspectives on water in cultural and spiritual context.

**Session on "Indigenous World Views and Spirituality"** (March 17). Esther Camac (UNESCO-sponsored participant from Costa Rica) chaired this session. The list of presenters reflects changes from several last-minute cancellations due (in most cases) to concerns about the impending Gulf war. The presentations included in the session were the following:

**Masanori Toyooka** (Japan, Ainu). *What is Ainu Association?* He spoke of the environmental crisis that the world faces because we have lost the connection between man and nature which the Ainu, and other indigenous peoples, have preserved. The urgency of recognizing indigenous rights to water will have the dual benefit of helping the indigenous communities directly, and opening a way for them to contribute to the global consciousness about our human responsibilities to the natural world.

**Jim Warton** (Australia). *Water and Kooma Peoples*. This talk focused on recent legal cases giving increasing recognition to Aboriginal land and water rights, and the environmental destruction that has ensued under the current Australian government's jurisdiction. This was contrasted to the historically seamless relationship between Aboriginal groups and the natural environment, echoing themes of the Ainu presentation (above). The paper advocated for consultative mechanisms to integrate Aboriginal perspectives into water resources planning and decision-making. (Fax: 0746 542254).

**Te Tika Mataipo** (Cook Islands). *Water and Spirituality in the Cook Islands*. She thanked the organizers for allowing a small nation's voice to be heard. The Cook Islands is surrounded by a vast expanse of water, and the indigenous practices are based on three connected pillars (1) sacredness, (2) respect, and (3) spirituality. She recounted a sea voyage she and others undertook in a traditional sailing vessel from Hawaii to the Cook Islands to show the validity and continuing cultural importance of traditional knowledge. (Email: [littlepoly@beach.co.ck](mailto:littlepoly@beach.co.ck))

**Jim Enote** (United States, Zuni Pueblo). *Thinking Critically about Maps, Water, Justice and Equity in Indigenous Communities*. Jim noted that water is a dominant theme in Zuni art and stories; everything refers to water. In the last 500 years, our waters and territories have been remapped. These maps have changed our landscape and our access to water. We are using new technologies to make

new maps to gain recognition of indigenous community rights. These new maps can be hand-drawn by elders, or done by GIS. [Jim is director of an ongoing project to create new, indigenously-controlled maps.] (Email: enote@igc.org).

**Tom Goldtooth** (United States, Sioux; Director, Indigenous Environmental Network). *Indigenous Perspectives on Water*. Tom discussed how many of his own people have lost touch with the spiritual connection with Mother Earth, and their prophecies warn of dire consequences from this. Indigenous people need to re-assert traditional values that have been worn down under colonial pressure. This is something that the present generation is just coming to grips with. It has social and psychological and affects; we are working to rebuild our sense of indigenous pride, and to be able to understand our own history. Indigenous people throughout the world share the symptom of colonization. But we are not "victims"; we are caretakers of the land and the water and we are struggling for rights to express this rightful relationship. (Email: ien@igc.org)

**Eleanor Dictaan-Bang-oa** (Philippines, Tebtebba Foundation). *Traditional Water Management Systems of the Kankanaeys of Besao (Northern Philippines)*. Water is a shared, communal resource. The rules for water use and management of the watershed show respect for nature. Changes from the outside economy are impacting on local water use and management. Major issues include depletion of water supply, non-propitiation of the spirits, commercial vegetable cultivation, and environmental impacts of logging and mining. Strengthening indigenous rights to the water and land resources is needed to protect against these growing threats to the sustainability of the natural resources. (Email: tebtebba@skyinet.net)

**Roy Laifungbam** (CORE, Manipur, India). Traditional water management in the Manipur Valley was established by the 8th Century and depended on both social and religious arrangements. Ceremonies to honor the ancestors also provided training for young people in environmental responsibility. The ancestral spirits communicate through water, and household shrines have an earthen pot filled with water for this purpose. A Spring-time ceremony to release minnows of a certain fish (*namu*) into the river affirms the centrality of water in cultural life. Recent flood control structures and increasing water pollution render these ceremonies infeasible, reflecting the disconnection of the local people with their traditional water-oriented culture. (Email: Coremanipur@vsnl.com)

**David Groenfeldt** (Discussant), *Summary of Key Issues Raised in the Session:*

- ⑩ Indigenous peoples have maintained a spiritual connection with water (and land) and have a deep sense of responsibility to protecting these.
- ⑩ Recognition of indigenous peoples and their water / land rights is a necessary step to allowing their spiritual connection and responsibility to be expressed;
- ⑩ Indigenous people can serve as an inspiration to guide mainstream society back into a healthier relationship with nature, working with, rather than against, natural forces.
- ⑩ Indigenous people need to speak out more strongly to protect the water

and land that is their heritage, both at the local and national level, and in international for a such as this conference.

- ⑩ Governments need to recognize the customary rights of indigenous people and encourage their involvement in management decisions about water

**Session on Indigenous Water Vision and Rights** (March 17). The session was chaired by Joji Carino and Victoria Corpuz, from Tebtebba Foundation in the Philippines. A summary of the speakers and their presentations is as follows:

**Leonidas Iza** (Ecuador, President, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, CONAIE). In Ecuador, 45% of the population is indigenous, produced 75% of the nation's food, but controls only a small proportion of the arable land. CONAIE integrates and represents a great variety of indigenous organizations, to support community demands such as land and water rights, and to challenge government policies that threaten indigenous peoples.

**Pablo Solon** (Fundacion Solon, Bolivia). *From Porto Alegre to Kyoto: Alternatives from the Indigenous and Cultural Diversity Perspective*. He presented the film "Blood of Mother Earth" depicting water conflicts among the Mapuche people in Chile and in Cochabamba, Bolivia regarding urban water privatization. With the film as background, he discussed a number of principles from an indigenous water perspective. One of these is that pollution is a crime, and the "polluter pays" principle is an attempt by governments and corporate interests to legalize a crime by offering compensation. (Email: aqua@funsolon.org)

**Rocio Bustamante** (WALIR, Bolivia). *Water Laws, Water Policy and Indigenous Water Rights: The WALIR Program*. The program seeks to inform debates on indigenous rights in water legislation and water policy. Among the many threats to indigenous water rights are population pressure, misunderstanding of indigenous technologies by government agencies, usurption of water rights by corporate interests, and lack of indigenous participation in water decisions. (Email: rociorenee@hotmail.com).

**Paulina Palacios** (WALIR – Ecuador). *The Struggle for Indigenous Water Rights and the Cultural Politics of Participation*. An important heritage of indigenous peoples is a sense of ethics about exploitation of natural resources, and sharing these resources among people. There is a collective right to a social order and harmony within a habitat that is sustainable. For example, the use of water and riverine resources such as fish, is vital to the survival of people such as the Mapuche, and they have developed their own traditions to ensure the continuity of those resources and of themselves. What is happening today in the forcable separation of indigenous people from their natural resources can only be described as a kind of "genocide". Without access to the resources that are central to their cultural life, the culture itself cannot survive for long.

**Issyad Ag Kato** (Organisation Vie et Developpement, Niger). *Tuareg Hydraulic*

*Organization and Development.* Water is particularly scarce in the Tuareg regions of Niger. The Tuareg approach to water management has evolved over centuries, and contains a basis for addressing current and future water challenges. (Email: [issyad-ag-kato@viola.fr](mailto:issyad-ag-kato@viola.fr)).

**Tshepo Khumbane** (Water for Food Movement, South Africa). *Indigenous Water Management and Water Rights.* Poor people in poor communities can do much for themselves by recovering their traditions of community enterprise, along with indigenous agricultural knowledge. Grassroots mobilization around small plots of irrigated vegetables and fruit is part of a larger effort to re-discover cultural identity and dignity which in turn strengthens community capacity to organize and undertake productive agriculture on very small plots of land. The Water for Food Movement helps poor people, and mostly women, to help themselves, while at the same time articulating their demands to government more effectively.

**Santos Augusto Narato** (Totonacapan Community, Guatemala). *The Guardians of Trees and Water.* Being recongized as indigenous people with a valued identity is not enough; we need to shoulder our rights and actively protect our forests and waters. Traditional Totonacapan society places great importance on managing forests and thereby protecting the water sources. A strong sense of community identity provides the basis for effective organizing and management of the land and water. Increasing threats from population growth and uncontrolled logging points to the increasing importance of strong cultural values and social identity. (Email: [cercap@itelgua.com](mailto:cercap@itelgua.com)).