

Session FT 1.15

TITLE OF THE SESSION: *Is Water Alive? Indigenous Understandings of Water*

Theme: Water for Growth and Development

SESSION CONVENER:

David Groenfeldt (Indigenous Water Initiative)

Tom Goldtooth, (*Dakota/Dine'*), Indigenous Environmental Network

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS :

1. Nancy Yanez (Agua Sustentable), Andean Social Water Vision -
2. Josephine Mandamin (*Anishinaabe*), Water in the Ojibway Three-Fires Tradition
3. Wahleah Johns (*Dine'*), Navajo Concepts of Water -

CONVENORS GENERAL REMARKS ABOUT THE SESSION

Indigenous peoples understand water to be sacred and in some way, alive; whereas Western water experts view water as a purely material substance. These contrasting understandings of water are at the root of conflicts over water rights, water use, and water management. The purpose of the session was to explore indigenous understandings in three contexts (Andes, Ojibway, Navajo) and with the help of the panelists and audience input, to try to clarify some of the ways that water is alive.

SYNOPSIS

Three local actions were presented (see below), followed by comments from the following panelists:

Jennifer Greene (Water Research Institute, USA)

Terge Oestigaard (International Water History Association, Norway)

Ellen Lutz (Cultural Survival, USA)

Anna Pinto (CORE, Manipur, India)

Scott Frazier (Native Waters, Project WET, Montana, USA)

LOCAL ACTIONS PRESENTED DURING THE SESSION

1. Andean Social Vision of Water (Nancy Yanez) – The concept of a "social water basin" was introduced as comprising the people living within a basin. A social water vision is their vision for their communities in relation to their basin. Work was conducted in four study basins, in Chile, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador. In each case, organizing at the level of the whole basin allowed local water problems to be addressed through community participation and negotiation. Is water alive? Yes, through the actions of the local people.

2. Ojibway Three-Fires Tradition and "water-walking" (Josephine Mandamin). In the summer of 2003, Josephine Mandamin led a small group of Ojibway women in a walk around Lake Superior, in response to a vision that she had earlier that year. The following summer they walked around Lake Michigan. In 2005 they walked around Lake Huron, and this year (2006) they intend to walk around Lake Ontario. In these walks she has seen places where there are no animals, and where there is no sound of birds, because of environmental damage. At the same time the walks have reminded her of the beautiful culture of the Ojibway people, All water is life, from birth to death. Mother Earth gives water freely, and we should not privatize it.

3. Navajo Concepts of Water (Wahela Johns). The controversy surrounding the Black Mesa coal mine (owned by Peabody Coal) has inspired a re-examination of the importance of water to the Navajo people. For the past 40 years, the mine has extracted pristine groundwater to mix with the coal in order to transport the slurry 270 miles to the electrical power station in Nevada. The springs that Navajo and Hopi people rely on in this arid region are drying up as a result of the pumping. The Navajo spiritual practices lie within these springs, and maintaining the springs is essential to spiritual life.

LESSONS LEARNED

All three cases are examples of taking action which is both inspired by spiritual and cultural traditions, and at the same time protects water/watersheds so that these bodies of water can continue to function as cultural reservoirs for the local indigenous cultures. The indigenous communities are linked to their local waters in a symbiotic relationship; indigenous culture and spirituality depends upon the health of the water and watershed, while the environmental health of the water depends on the spiritual practices of the indigenous communities.

Indigenous peoples actively manage their water through spiritual practices (ceremonies and rituals), as well as the more familiar physical practices (e.g., diverting water for irrigation). What outsiders may see as under-utilized water resources are already being managed and "used" through spiritual practices. The deep respect manifested through indigenous spiritual is needed for sustainable management of water bodies. The degradation of the American Great Lakes and the Navajo aquifer are lessons in the dangers of ignoring indigenous peoples spiritual respect for water.

KEY MESSAGES

- Concept of a "social basin" that unites all the stakeholders who share a water source and have a common interest in protecting it;
- Religious ritual and spiritual practice is tied to the water source / water body on which the community depends;
- The health of water bodies is protected through spiritual practices, both directly (through harnessing spiritual forces) and indirectly (through motivating political and organizational action).
- Understanding water takes a long time. Indigenous peoples have been learning about their local waters for many generations. Their knowledge needs to be applied to local water management.

ORIENTATIONS FOR ACTION

1. Include the social dimension (local communities) in the concept of watersheds and water basins;
2. Include cultural knowledge and spiritual practices of local indigenous communities as an integral part of the watershed/basin.
3. Respect the spiritual and cultural knowledge of indigenous peoples, including their understanding of their local waters and watersheds. Treat these local understandings as being equally valid as outsiders' paradigms about water management. The two sets of paradigms need not be in conflict; with mutual respect, each can benefit from the other.