

An Overview of Water Ethics

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“Water Ethics” is a young and still-emerging field that has mostly grown out of an initiative by UNESCO’s Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) from 1998 to 2004. An initial report in 2000 was followed in 2004 by a series of 14 reports on various aspects of “Water and Ethics” ranging from gender to groundwater to environment, plus a synthesis report, “Best Ethical Practice in Water Use” (co-authored by C. Brelet and Lord Selborne). The reports are available through UNESCO or on the Water Ethics Network website, waterethics.org.

When the UNESCO-COMEST initiative concluded in 2004, the topic was taken up by the Botin Foundation in Spain, resulting in two important publications: *Water Ethics* (2007), a book of case studies edited by Ramon Llamas and associates, and in 2012 a special issue of *Water Policy* edited by Jerome Delli-Priscoli. Meanwhile, in 2010, a book on water ethics by Peter Brown and Jeremy Schmidt republished key articles related to water ethics and helped frame the topic as a distinct subfield of water management. My own book, *Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis* (2013) spelled out a systematic framework (summarized in my article on page 8). Most recently, COMEST has again taken up the theme of water ethics, including both fresh and marine water, with a new report expected in 2018 or 2019.

Parallel to this evolutionary process has been the emergence of Indigenous Water voices, primarily through the triennial World Water Forums. At the 2003 Forum in Kyoto, Indigenous participants proclaimed the “Indigenous Peoples Kyoto Water Declaration” which, though not using the terminology of ethics, was all about ethical responsibilities to protect water, a theme brought home to the U.S. public through the Standing Rock demonstrations in 2016. Indigenous water values have been indirectly absorbed into the development of water ethics, but there is much potential for more deliberate alliance-building.

The “values space” of water management has become, rather surprisingly, an exciting place to be. In addition to “water ethics,” the buzz words include “water integrity,” “water stewardship” and “water values” with initiatives and organizations formed around each of these themes. All these concepts and more can be subsumed within a broad definition of “water ethics.” In spite of the bad taste that the word “ethics” might leave in some of our mouths(!), the deliberate application of ethics has the potential for fostering truly integrated policies that can guide us to the elusive goal of sustainable, just and hopeful water management ■

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