

ADVOCATES WARN OF THIRST AND TURMOIL FOR A PARCHED PLANET

A World Without Water by Ginger Adams Otis

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In 1995 World Bank vice president Ismail Serageldin made a much quoted prediction for the new millennium: "If the wars of this century were fought over oil, the wars of the next century will be fought over water."

Serageldin has been proven correct much faster than he or anyone else thought. Two years into the 21st century, the global water wars are upon us. The very bleak details about water security may finally seep out during the 10-day United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) starting Monday in Johannesburg, South Africa. While heads of state and corporate bigwigs converge in Sandton (rumored to be Africa's wealthiest suburb), thousands of anti-globalization activists and environmentalists will be attending shadow summits just down the street.

They'll be trying to call attention to the dangers of privatizing the world's water supplies, and pointing to places like Nelspruit, 125 miles to the north, where residents now buy their drinking water from the Biwater corporation, and are all but dying of dehydration. The problem isn't water flow but cash flow: Poor residents can't pay privatized rates. It's a scenario that's beginning to play out all over South Africa. "That's exactly what's wrong with privatization," says Maude Barlow, chair of the Council of Canadians, Canada's largest public advocacy group. "These companies completely reject the idea that water is a common property belonging to all living creatures.

Their only goal is to commodify the earth's most precious resource." The concept of privatizing water service has been around since Napoleon III, but only 5 percent of the world population currently receives water from corporations. Activists want to stop the process before it goes any further; the world's water lords want rapid expansion. In 1998, when the private sector began angling for the water market in earnest, the World Bank predicted the global trade in water would soon generate revenues of up to \$800 billion a year.

Two years later, at a World Water Forum in the Hague, a triumvirate of multinational water companies backed by the World Trade Organization (WTO) successfully strong-armed the UN into defining water as a human need (which can be sold for profit by private companies) instead of a human right (which means people are ensured equal access on a nonprofit basis). Faster than you can say Evian, revenue projections jacked into the multiple trillions. Private companies had a green light to approach cities and states around the globe (usually cash-strapped ones) and offer to lease, buy, or enter into a consortium agreement for the existing municipal water systems. After privatization is complete, the companies make a profit by charging residents every time they turn on a tap or flush a toilet. Some also offer wastewater services, such as sewage disposal, and implement water treatment plants.

Many of these companies get profit guarantees written into their contracts. For example, if residents use less water than predicted, companies can raise rates so profits don't fall below a predetermined number. Once in control of a water system, they can also take any surplus and sell it off to the highest bidder, usually a neighboring city that's experiencing an unexpected shortfall. In some parts

of the world, reports the trade journal Global Water Intelligence, water commands the same price as oil. No wonder Fortune magazine touted the water market as a "safe harbor in stocks" a place that promises steady consistent returns well into the next century." The two reigning conglomerates are Vivendi Universal and Suez, both based in France, which have amassed 70 percent of the existing world water market. Together they deliver water services to more than a hundred million people. Suez operates in 130 countries and Vivendi in more than 90. Right behind them are Bouygues-SAUR (French), RWE-Thames (German), and Bechtel-United Utilities (American). These are the biggest multinationals, but there are numerous other companies doing the same thing on a smaller scale.

But what of the world's water crisis? Currently the UN identifies approximately six "hot stains," places where water is so scarce that human life may not be sustainable and conflict over dwindling resources is an ever present threat. Water giants like Vivendi insist privatization and conservation aren't mutually exclusive. They say it can actually improve water service, because for-profit companies are wealthy enough to invest in new technology and infrastructure improvements to aging systems where poor governments are not. Activists like Barlow say for-profit companies are not set up as sustainable enterprises or to conserve resources. The more water sold, the better their bottom line, so why should they try to halt the world's parching?

Here's the really hard news Barlow says the water lords don't want known: Not only is there the same amount of water on the planet as there was at its creation, it is almost all the same water. There is no secret source to replace the vast quantities that modern humankind consumes, and technology hasn't come up with a magic bullet either. Desalination of seawater has proven outrageously expensive and leaves behind brackish water mostly uninhabitable for marine life. According to the latest official calculations, there are only 8.6 million cubic miles of fresh water left on earth, a mere 2.6 percent of the 330 million cubic feet of total water. The UN predicts that two-thirds of the world's population will live in water-scarce regions by 2025, and many of them in regions previously considered water-rich, like the United States.

Environmentalists and even some heads of state are frantically trying to undo the damage. Much of the problem can be traced to river damming and the Green Revolution, both of which were embraced by the American government during the last century and exported globally. The Green Revolution was supposed to solve the world's hunger problem by introducing high-yield miracle seeds to developing nations, especially India and China. Instead it created an ongoing irrigation crisis by replacing drought-resistant indigenous crops with water-guzzling varieties. Farmers were forced to forgo traditional and sustainable irrigation methods; deep wells became the norm, pulling precious groundwater out of already water-scarce areas. Then developers began trying to solve the irrigation problem by building big dams.

According to Sandra Postel of the Global Water Policy Project, a water conservation advocacy group, there were 5000 large dams (more than 15 meters high) worldwide in 1950. There are now 45,000. On average, there have been two large dams constructed every day for the past 50 years. "They were built with the best of intentions," says Postel, "to supply hydroelectric power, irrigation, and public water, and to control floods. But we didn't understand the full range of ecological consequences that would unfold." Now four of the world's greatest rivers (the Ganges, Yellow River, Nile, and Colorado) routinely dry up before reaching the ocean, and water that normally would roll through the earth and feed aquifers runs off pavements and rooftops into sewers, eventually ending up (usually carrying pesticides and toxins) in the ocean, but without moisturizing

forests and marshlands on the way. Add relentless human consumption, industrial farming, and global warming and you've got the Ogallala Aquifer, which stretches from the Texas Panhandle to South Dakota and is believed to have once contained 4 trillion tons of pristine water. It's now mined continuously by over 200,000 groundwater wells.

They pull out 13 million gallons per minute which is 14 times faster than nature's replenishing rate. Each year since 1991 the aquifer's water table has dropped three feet a huge amount when multiplied by the area. By some estimates, more than half its water is gone. And that's not America's only problem area: one of the heaviest water-using places on the planet California is in serious trouble. The state's Department of Water Resources says that if more supplies aren't found by 2020, residents will face a shortfall of fresh water nearly as great as the amount that all of its towns and cities together are consuming today. And the U.S. is still considered water-rich; countries with less abundance are in even more danger.

That's one note activists will stress at next week's meeting: danger. Since they've had no luck convincing governments to stop making quick profits off "the commons essential resources that historically belong to one and all they're going to invoke public security. "Water scarcity is now a serious source of conflict in many places," says Barlow. "Almost every country in the Middle East is facing a water crisis of historic proportions." Israel has aggressively mined water wherever possible throughout the region, severely taxing water systems in Syria and Jordan (not to mention Palestinian townships). And Turkey has caused serious tension with plans to dam the Euphrates River, thereby diverting much of its life-sustaining flow to Syria and Iraq. Bangladesh, which depends heavily on rivers that originate in India, is suffering terribly now because India has diverted and dammed so many of its water sources.

In Africa, relations between Botswana and Namibia are severely strained by Namibian plans to construct a pipeline to divert water from the shared Okavango River. Ethiopia plans to take more water from the Nile, although Egypt is heavily dependent on those waters for irrigation and power. And as water tables fall steadily in the North China Plain (which yields more than half of China's wheat and nearly a third of its corn) as well as in northwest India's Punjab region, experts are bracing for a highly combustible imbalance between available water supplies and human needs. Officials attending the upcoming WSSD meeting are certainly aware of these problems. They just can't figure out which way to approach a solution. Most of the northern governments (essentially the U.S., Canada, and the European Union) want the UN to start adopting trade agreements similar to those put forth by the WTO.

They're pressuring the UN to solve the world's resource crisis by implementing "voluntary partnerships" with private companies to take over government-run industries devoted to public health, clean air, and water. Representatives from the companies will be on hand to reassure officials that they can privatize and conserve at the same time. Delegates from poorer nations, with the possible exception of South Africa, aren't buying that idea. They got a taste of WTO justice when northern trade partners wanted to export genetically modified seeds. Several developing countries declined to buy because they don't want modified food in their environments, and they landed in WTO court for trade violations. But under previously signed UN accords, nations do have the right to refuse products they feel are environmentally unsound.

One of the questions poorer nations want answered at the WSSD is which entity has ultimate power when agreements conflict. They hope it's the UN otherwise they can all too easily envision their

natural resources being siphoned off to nurture the golf courses and swimming pools of the world's elite. Realistically and unfortunately, says Barlow, the shadow summits planned for next week probably won't have much of an impact on the final WSSD outcome. The bigger goal, she says, is to flame public outrage and derail the privatization trend at the World Water Forum scheduled for next March in Japan. But Barlow and crew had better hurry: The water crisis is growing so fast that even developed nations are swigging from each other.

Canada's abundant fresh water supply has already whetted the appetite of George Bush. There's been talk from his administration about using the existing oil-pipeline infrastructure in the Northern Provinces to flow Canadian water to the American Midwest, which, under existing the North American Free Trade Agreement, is perfectly legitimate. And once Canada opens the taps, it can't turn them off again without violating NAFTA accords. "Isn't it great," says Barlow, "that while much of the developing world is grappling with extreme water deprivation, the U.S. is making contingency plans to keep desert mirages like Las Vegas up and running?"