

Peace Ecology (excerpt)

by Randall Amster

Mark Twain once purportedly said that “whiskey’s for drinking—water’s for fighting.” While the evidence for attributing this to Twain is shaky at best, the quote is nonetheless frequently invoked as a foregone conclusion: people will fight over water because it is scarce, essential, and invaluable for the growth and development of human societies. In reality, “water wars” are exceedingly rare, with the overwhelming majority of the world’s 263 shared river basins being subject to treaties, agreements, and other mechanisms for allocating their flow. Still, there is a deeper concern reflected in Twain’s apocryphal quote, namely that while water wars between nations may be rare, modern water utilization on the whole often reflects a collective war that humankind is waging on the environment. All too often, what are coded as “shared waters” and “peaceful resolutions” to human-human conflicts still involve deep incursions against the natural flow of surface waters, including channelizing rivers to fix national boundaries, altering the saline and sediment levels, and damming rivers for hydroelectric plants. Such outcomes are part of a larger orientation that comes to equate peace with control—especially control of nature.

As human cultures expand, water is emerging as the central resource in local and global politics alike. Pressures to privatize and commodify water are continually being brought to bear, often under the guise of development schemes that are portrayed as linking growth with security. To ensure that water flows even in places where it is highly problematic—from Abu Dhabi to Phoenix—massive delivery infrastructures are contemplated, including energy-intensive desalination plants and circuitous concrete canals transporting water hundreds of miles across deserts. Science fiction scenarios abound, as plans are conceived to capture clouds, drag icebergs, and create mountains and lakes for delivering water supplies to thirsty nations. One of the first high-tech regional water projects, which would serve as a template for similar projects worldwide, was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) developed in the 1930s, comprised of a series of elaborate dams and hydropower generating stations. When World War II broke out, the project was reoriented toward wartime production, doubling its power generation and producing a majority of the phosphorous used by the U.S. military for bullets, bombs, and chemical weapons, as well as aluminum for aircraft. The “most significant contribution to the war” was created at a TVA-powered laboratory: the fissionable uranium-235 that was used to fuel the Manhattan Project that developed the world’s first nuclear weapon (Ward 2003, 85).

The TVA example is stark for its specific militarism, yet it reveals something deeper about how we tend to view water. Oftentimes the choice for transnational actors appears to be one of engaging in either water wars or joint development projects—in essence, either militarism or capitalism; a World War and/or the World Bank. If we are inclined to associate the latter with peace, then it obviously becomes preferable to the alternative, and yet deeper questions about the meaning of water remain unresolved. Water is inherently fluid, unpredictable, prone to extremes of either floods or droughts, both transient and *in situ*, primeval in its simplicity and purity (cf. Postel 2010). Water reshapes images beneath its surface and accurately reflects those above it; it is “an active agent, changing all it touches ... creating new courses and possibilities yet to be appreciated by humans” (Blatter, Ingram, and Doughman 2001, 3). As we co-evolve with all of

the essential resources in our midst, we must also apprehend “the limitations of instrumental rationality in capturing the meanings of water and shortcomings of modern science in improving our understanding of its treatment in society” (Blatter, Ingram, and Doughman 2001, 3).

Increasingly, we come to recognize that no peace between nations is possible without reconciling underlying water issues. It has been surmised that the failure to attain peace in the Middle East between Israel and its Arabic neighbors has been due in part to the concomitant failure to achieve a mutually cognizable agreement over the Jordan River and underground aquifers in the region, yielding a climate of “mistrust, fears of dependency, and perceived threats to national sovereignty” (Blatter, Ingram, and Levesque 2001, 38). In the case of India and Pakistan, where border clashes and warlike tensions have persisted for decades, a treaty governing the Indus River basin was signed in 1960, following a World Bank proposal to divide the waters between the two countries. While the agreement may have helped forestall violent interstate conflict, it also led to “an all-out effort to build a monumental array of dams and canals”—leading one of the Pakistani (formerly Indian) engineers on the project to observe: “This was like a war. These were huge works.... Everybody was after us. They said we had sold the rivers, that we were traitors to our country” (Ward 2003, 93).

What we learn from these examples is that water is more than a mere resource, and that both fighting over it and dividing its spoils are equally problematic resolutions to looming global water issues. As we have seen throughout this volume, both the hardware and software of conflict must be addressed, requiring a simultaneous emphasis on peacemaking at both the human-human and human-environment interfaces. As Vandana Shiva (2002, 66-67) documents, efforts to privatize water and dam rivers often result in the displacement of peoples and the despoliation of the environment—as well as an ensuing “centralization of power over water” that conjures a double meaning for the concept of “hydropower.” While it may be the case that “the world is more conscious than ever of the unbreakable nexus between water and life” (Hiscock 2012, 58), this realization—coupled with depletion of freshwater sources and a rising contingent of global competitors for resources—has led many to speculate that the wars of the 21st century will be fought primarily over water, not oil or other valuable resources. On the other hand, more promisingly, a spate of literature has emerged in recent years suggesting that water can be a powerful basis for transborder cooperation, collaboration, conservation—and peace.

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There are myriad lessons to be gleaned from the field of hydro-politics, which we may take as the “systematic study of conflict and cooperation between states over water resources that transcend international borders” (quoted in Dinar 2009, 111). Chief among these lessons are that water highlights our innate interdependence with one another and the environment alike, and likewise that water directly connects the economic and ecological spheres of human life. As with other environmental components, “water bodies respect no political borders” (Dinar 2009, 111), thus engendering a wider perspective that is particularly useful in light of global scarcity and the essential nature of the resource. While studies of water in relation to violent conflict have reached varied conclusions..., there is an emerging consensus that scarcity in the context of renewability coupled with the “critical need” for water can provide the impetus for

cooperation—yielding “peaceful and successful conflict management schemes” even among “states with recent militarized conflicts” (Dinar, Dinar, and Kurukulasuriya 2011, 810, 830).

If we take to heart the premise that scarcity and essentiality can promote cooperation, then the prospects for water to spur transborder peace initiatives are indeed promising. Nearly half of the earth’s land mass abuts river basins shared by more than one nation, and more than three-quarters of the available fresh water flows through an international river basin—reminding us in stark geographical terms that “a river is without a nationality” (Ward 2003, 188). It is becoming increasingly clear that lasting peace is possible, from the Middle East to the American Southwest, “only if water is taken into account” (Ward 2003, 195). Highlighting these themes, the United Nations declared 2013 as the “International Year of Water Cooperation” and the years from 2005-2015 as the “Water for Life Decade”—optimistically citing the operative notion that “history has often shown that the vital nature of freshwater is a powerful incentive for cooperation and dialogue, compelling stakeholders to reconcile even the most divergent views. Water more often unites than divides people and societies” (www.un.org/waterforlifedecade). In order to reach this ambitious horizon, we must strive to “build bridges between various meanings and understandings” and to enhance “the legitimacy of noninstrumental uses of water” (Blatter, Ingram, and Levesque 2001, 52). In short, we must recognize water as boundless—as *life*.

If we are thus seeking the robust *peace* contemplated by the peace ecology perspective, then we will need to do more than sign treaties that allocate every drop of water among competing users. Control and peace are often dichotomous, at least in the context of transnational security issues and a complex geopolitical landscape where looming resource wars and ongoing processes of economic colonization continue to dominate the discourse. Physical borders between nations are increasingly militarized in the post-9/11 era, even as the barriers to so-called “free trade” and footloose capital are simultaneously relaxed. This has the effect of diminishing the potential for genuine exchange among peoples and communities on opposite sides of national borders, interrupting the natural processes of ecosystems that do not abide the largely artificial lines on maps. It also serves to exacerbate tensions among nations, leading to the creation of permanent war economies whose explicit “national security” focus is the procurement and control of dwindling resources—down to even the essentials of food, water, and energy. The zero-sum logic of scarcity and competition is palpable, and has become a central norm of international relations, even as its workings are becoming little more than a self-fulfilling downward spiral in which vast resources are expended in the attempt to secure more of them.

[A]ny exploration of processes confronting these eventualities is potentially revolutionary in its full dimensions. The set of interrelated themes brought together under the rubric of peace ecology remain grounded in the notion that the crises of scarcity and conflict are also opportunities for mutually beneficial engagement born of necessity yet aimed at longer-term sustainability. The cultivation of a sense of shared destiny and mutual necessity can bring even ardent transnational adversaries to the negotiating table, since, as Alexander Carus (2006, 11) reminds us, “environmental problems ignore political borders.” This emerging holistic perspective suggests that peoples and nations have the potential to find ways of managing ecological concerns that not only work to avoid conflicts but that can also serve to promote peaceful relations among human communities and with the environment itself.

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