

Water: More Valuable Than Gold

NOT LONG AGO ANISHINAABE CHIEF EDDIE BENTON Banai had a dream. He foresaw a time when “an ounce of drinking water will cost the same as an ounce of gold.” So he spoke with the community, especially the women, who are the keepers of the land and waters and the decision-makers of the Nation. He asked the people what they planned to do about the situation.

The Great Lakes hold the largest surface area of freshwater found in one place anywhere in the world. They hold 20 percent of the world’s fresh surface water: six quadrillion gallons. Most people who live in the Great Lakes Basin can’t imagine a shortage of usable water ever being a problem.

Yet the Lakes are under threat from contamination, over-consumption, invasive species,



and diversion. Any one of these alone raises serious ecological and economic concerns; together they’re a dangerous mixture.

The Anishinaabe have lived in and around the Great Lakes for thousands of years, and have become increasingly alarmed with the pollution, logging, and grand water diversion schemes dreamed up by those who live far away. They felt the responsibility to care for the Lakes also rested with the majority non-Aboriginal population. Feeling that more awareness and action were needed, the women (the water-keepers) decided to walk around each of the Great Lakes carrying a copper bucket of water.

Laws currently governing the Great Lakes would not

have been put in place without the persistent demands of citizens. Two provinces, eight states, two federal governments and numerous Aboriginal nations who have lived with the Lakes for thousands of years claim a say in how the water is used and how the enormous land area feeding the Lakes is cared for. Given pressures from various industries and the surrounding population, it’s not an easy job. And trade agreements now in place don’t help.

The place of the Great Lakes in trade agreements between the US and Canada has been a hot debate for years. Many people have focused on the issue of large-scale diversions from the Lakes, fearing that export tankers filled with Great Lakes water would lead to a literal flood of water diversions and extraction. Under the terms of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), any multi-national corporation extracting water from the Great Lakes for export sets a precedent that would allow any other corporation the same right.

Proposals from a number of corporations have come close to receiving approval. If that were to happen, it would “trigger” the NAFTA terms. As Tony Clarke of the Polaris Institute explains: “Under international trade treaties ... water is understood to be an economic good. Once water, as an economic good, is extracted and sold for a commercial purpose, no government or regulatory regime would be allowed to put a ban or even a quota on it.” As well, while water is currently ‘safe’ from export under NAFTA, things could change if a corporation issued a Chapter 11 challenge to restrictions on bulk water exports. If successful, the challenge could open up water for bulk export.

Bottled water has become a fast-growing and profitable industry since the trade agreements were signed. Bottled water corporations have the relatively pure water of some of the Great Lakes in their sights, taking advantage of Article 207.9 of the Great Lakes Annex Agreement. This article permits unlimited extraction of water if it’s put into containers 20 liters or smaller in size. Since most water for sale is found in litre or 500 ml bottles, the ruling is a gift for bottled water companies. And that’s not a coincidence, according to the Polaris Institute, because American and Canadian legislators have bottled-water



By Julie Graham and Shannon Neufeldt, with special thanks to Josephine Mandamin

lobbyists at their elbows.

Angry that the U.S. and Canadian governments failed to respect First Nations in its 2001 Great Lakes Charter, where they were treated as “stakeholders” rather than sovereign nations, Aboriginal groups formed a coalition and signed the 2005 Tribal and First Nations Great Lakes Water Accord. In the meantime, the Mother Earth Water Walkers had begun their journey.

Compare the terms of NAFTA with the Mother Earth Water Walkers and their view of water, which they see as “our mother’s blood.” In response to Chief Eddie Benton Banai’s question, the Mother Earth Water Walkers have



Mother Earth Water Walkers.

now walked around each of the five Great Lakes carrying a copper bucket of water. Each walk took from two to five weeks. Elder Josephine Mandamin talks about choosing to

walk — the slowest form of transportation — as a way to reinforce ancient values and take a public stand. Through their long, patient journey, these women have emphasized both the seriousness of the threats facing water and the unity of the Lakes’ entire watershed.

The Walkers ask us all to be aware of the importance of our water. Josephine Mandamin says, “This message also has to go to the earthly powers that be. Our First Nations/Tribal Leaders must take the step toward acting on their responsibility. Our elected government leaders must also enact policies to protect our waters and waterways.”

She continues, “This journey with the pail of water that we carry is our way of Walking the Talk. We really don’t have to say anything. Just seeing us walk is enough to make a person realize that, yes, we are carriers of the water. We are carrying the water for the generations to come. Our great grandchildren and the next generation will be able to say, yes, our grandmothers and grandfathers kept this water for us!!”

For now, the Water Walkers have done their work. And the rest of us?

WHAT WE CAN DO

SIGN the KAIROS “Counting On Water” action for legislation requiring Canadian corporations to protect water and human rights. See www.kairoscanada.org or call toll free: 1-877-403-8933, extension 241.

SUPPORT the idea that water is a sacred gift and should be available to all. Ask your municipality to sign a Water Declaration, and examine how you and your community can conserve and protect water. See the campaign section of the KAIROS website.

If you live in an area where the tap water is safe, **CONSIDER SAYING NO TO BOTTLED WATER.** Your choice makes a difference — to communities, the environment, and our publicly-funded water systems. For more information, See the campaign section of the KAIROS website or check out www.insidethebottle.org

CONNECT with First Nations in your area and learn about water issues from their point of view. If you are Aboriginal, consider adding your voice and point of view to national campaigns for public water and healthy watersheds. Learn about the Mother Earth Walkers: www.motherearthwaterwalk.com

LEARN about NAFTA and other agreements: check out the trade section on the KAIROS website and sign up for the KAIROS Trade E-bulletin (contact rjeremic@kairoscanada.org).

1. “Loophole could open Great Lakes water to bottling”: Point of View. Tony Clarke/ Polaris Institute, 20 August 2005. www.polarisinstitute.org

Recommended resources

(available on the KAIROS 2006-07 CD or on the sites listed):

Sierra Club’s Great Lakes primer: www.sierraclub.ca/national/great-lakes/great-lakes-primer.pdf

Canadian Environmental Law Association FAQ sheets such as “Great Lakes Water and Quantity and Quality” or “Bottled Water” at cela.ca/faq