

Celebrating Cooperation on World Water Day

Around the world today, thirst-quenched citizens with global minds will celebrate World Water Day – a day when the issues of water are passionately embraced. On most other days, we just brush our teeth, wash our clothes, and enjoy the satiating need for water, forgetting that the need for World Water Day is because water is a precious resource.

Water issues are at the interface between two conflicting societal pressures: increased water need for a growing population and more intensive enterprises to support this population, all relying on a decreasing and deteriorating water supply. Water may be a renewable resource, but it is not unlimited. Keep an eye on water, they don't make it any more.

Canada has been referred to as the “world's water keeper” and with good reason. Canada is home to almost 900,000 kilometers of surface freshwater and 25 percent of the world's wetlands, which is more than any other country on the planet. In the Great Lakes alone rests 18 percent of the world's surface supply of drinkable freshwater. Yet many Canadians treat water as a limitless resource.

For the sake of future generations, Canada can't afford to be neither naïve nor complacent. Haphazard decision-making and ill-conceived governance will destabilize our use of this common resource, placing our personal and economic health at risk. We need eyes on the waters of our Great Lakes. They don't make Great Lakes anymore.

This year's World Water Day celebrates the need for cooperation in the management of our water resources – and Canada and the US are global leaders. Cooperation between Canada and the US on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin has a long, rich and successful history. Past cooperative initiatives in the Great Lakes have been largely born out of reactions to serious problems confronting the basin, such as the 1969 eruption of the Cuyahoga River, the discovery of Lake Erie “dead zones,” and the onslaught of invasive species.

But there are new challenges facing us today. The price of water has risen remarkably, and the fingers of water demands are creeping into the basin. We are facing a time when proper governance and management are critical to promoting a thriving basin. Reactionary policies are not good enough. We must be proactive. We must be cooperative, visionary, and truly sustainable.

Co-operating groups of water visionaries on the Great Lakes Basin have emerged. The Transborder Research University Network for Water Stewardship was started in 2010 as an international, interdisciplinary research network comprising of 16 Canadian and US institutions committed to innovative research, training, and engagement on issues affecting the Great Lakes Basin. A year later, this grassroots movement has 50 plus academics and students involved on bi-national research teams.

Their inaugural project, the Great Lakes Futures Project, is using scenario analysis to make predictions on plausible futures of the Great Lakes Basin. Their driving questions are: what are the foreseeable pressures being placed on these water bodies, and what may be the unintended consequences of society's actions or inactions? They are exploring futuristic decision-making: if the future unfolds in a certain way, what can we do about it?

In the year of cooperation and collaboration on water issues, the gatekeepers are already active. They aim to be the stewards of the basin, with a dedication to providing leadership that will ensure that the Great Lakes remain great. For our generation and future generations.

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