The Missing Piece: A Water Ethic

We must make the protection of freshwater ecosystems a central goal in all that we do.

BY SANDRA POSTEL

Now for the million dollar questions: Why has so much of modern water management gone awry? Why is it that ever greater amounts of money have been spent on projects and technology that have not only failed to solve the world’s water problems? Why, in so many places on this planet, are rivers drying up, lakes shrinking, and water tables falling?

The answer, in part, is simple: We have been trying to meet insatiable demands by continuously expanding a finite water supply. In the long run, of course, that is a losing proposition: It is impossible to expand a finite supply indefinitely, and in many parts of the world the “long run” has arrived.

For sure, measures to conserve, recycle, and more efficiently use water have enabled many places to contain their water demands and to avoid or at least delay an ecological reckoning. Such tried-and-true measures as thrifty irrigation techniques, water-saving plumbing fixtures, native landscaping, and wastewater recycling have been developed, and the amount of water required to grow food, produce materials goods, and meet household needs. The conservation potential of these measures has been tremendous.

Yet something is missing from this prescription, something less tangible than drip irrigation lines and low-flow showerheads, but, in the final analysis, more important. It has to do with modern society’s disconnection from nature’s web of life and from water’s most fundamental role as the basis of that life. In our technologically sophisticated world, we no longer grasp the need for the wild river, the blackwater swamp, or even the diversity of species collectively performing nature’s work. By and large, society views water in a utilitarian fashion—as a “resource” valued only when it is extracted from nature and put to use on a farm, in a factory, or in a home. Conservation, in this sense, has been quick to assume rights to use water but slow to recognize obligations to preserve and protect it. Better pricing and more open markets will assign water a higher value in its economic functions, and breed healthy competition that works out wasteful and unproductive uses. But this will not solve the deeper problem: What is needed is a set of guidelines and principles that stops us from chopping away at natural systems until nothing is left of their life-sustaining roles, roles in which the market place fails to value adequately, if at all. In short, we need a water ethic—a guide to right conduct in the face of complex decisions about natural systems that we do not and cannot fully understand.

The essence of such an ethic is to make the protection of freshwater ecosystems a central goal in all that we do. This may sound like an idealistic prescription in light of our ever more crowded world of needs and aspirations. Yet it is no more radical a notion than suggesting that a building be given a solid foundation before adding 30 stories to it. Water is the foundation of every human enterprise, and if that foundation is insecure, everything built upon it will be insecure, too. As such, our stewardship of water will determine not only the quality but the staying power of human societies.

The adoption of such a water ethic would represent a historic shift away from the strictly utilitarian approach to water management and toward an integrated, holistic approach that recognizes people and water as interconnected parts of a greater whole. Instead of asking how we can further control and manipulate rivers, lakes, and streams to meet our ever-growing demands, we would ask instead how we can best satisfy human needs while accommodating the ecological requirements of freshwater systems. It would lead us, as well, to deeper questions of human values, in particular how to narrow the wide gap between the haves and have-nots while remaining within the bounds of what a healthy ecosystem can sustain.

Embedded within this water ethic is a fundamental question: Do rivers and the life within them have a right to water? In his famous essay, “Should Trees Have Standing?” toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects, legal scholar Christopher D. Stone argued that yes, rivers and trees and other objects of nature do have rights, and these should be protected by granting legal standing to guardians of the voiceless entities. “A river of nature, much as the rights of children are protected by legal guardians.

It is not only just but also necessary that all living things get enough water. The utilitarian code that continues to guide most water management may fit with prevailing market-based socio-economic paradigms, but it is neither universal nor unchanging. The American conservationist Aldo Leopold observed the extension of the ethics to the natural environment as “an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity.” More recently, Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson noted in his book, Consilience, that ethical codes historically have arisen through the interplay of biology and culture. “Ethics, in the empiricist view,” Wilson observes, “is conduct favored consistently enough throughout a society to be regarded as moral.” In other words, ethics are not static; they evolve with social consciousness. But that evolution is not automatic. The extension of rights to living nature demands that evolution be led by women required leaders, movements, advocates, and activists that collectively pulled society onto higher moral ground. So it will be with the extension of rights to water: It will not come because of the inherent goodness of the various entities of which they are a part. As societies wrap their collective minds around the consequences of global environmental change—river floods, chronic water shortages, disappearing species—it may well be that a new ethic will emerge, one that says it is not enough that all living things get enough water before some get more than enough. Because in the end, we’re all in this together.

Sandra Postel is director of the Global Water Policy Project, visiting senior lecturer in environmental studies at Mount Holyoke College, and author of Last Oasis: Facing Water Scarcity.