

# MOVING TOWARDS RACIAL & SOCIAL JUSTICE AND A RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE IS NECESSARY TO SURVIVE THE CLIMATE CRISIS

SEPTEMBER 2020

## Advisory Committee Authors:

- **Andrea Muehlebach** (Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto who has worked with and written about water movements in Europe for several years)
- **Arlene Slocombe** (Executive Director, Wellington Water Watchers)
- **Franklin Frederick** (Brazilian writer and environmental activist)
- **Laura Hamilton** (Founding Member, Divest Waterloo; Climate Justice activist)
- **Mike Balkwill** (Campaign Director, Wellington Water Watchers)
- **Paul Baines** (Coordinator of the Blue Community project for the Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph and a member of the Great Lakes Commons initiative)
- **Rod Whitlow** (Ohnekanos Rohskenhrakehta, Kahnyen'kehàka)
- **Tamanna Kohi** (Board Member, Wellington Water Watchers)



PEOPLE'S WATER CAMPAIGN  
WATER FOR LIFE—NOT PROFIT

“All things are bound together, all things connect. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls also the children of the earth.” - Oren Lyons, Onondaga Faithkeeper.

The intersection of water security and racial and social justice is an important opportunity to move toward equity among peoples and restore a reciprocal relationship with nature. Water unifies people who recognize it is essential to the conditions that make life possible on Earth and who revere its sacred nature. Water is also a site where public and private interests contest to control access to water. Global investment banker Goldman Sachs has said “water is the new oil”.

Framing water protection as an issue of racial and social justice moves the issue from the politically neutral realm of policy analysis to the high moral ground of human rights and rights of nature, equality and preserving the sacred conditions that make life possible. Framing together water security, racial and social justice brings into public debate questions of access to, ownership of, and governance of water. It exposes the inequality of forcing Indigenous people living on reserves to boil water just to have clean drinking water.

Creating equity in relationships among peoples and a reciprocal relationship with nature begins with recognizing the sacred life of water; the inherent human and treaty rights of Indigenous peoples; and the rights of all people and nature to access to the water required to survive and thrive.

## WATER IS LIFE, AND SACRED

All life, on this beautiful blue planet we call home requires water to exist. Water in its liquid form is however a rare occurrence in the universe. Earth is a blue planet because it exists within the unique conditions of being a very specific distance from a sun of a very particular size. Outside this set of conditions water would evaporate as a gas or freeze into ice. Earths' water is possible because of this delicate balance. This gift from the universe is just one illustration of how nature's delicate balance enables life on Earth.

To live in balance with nature requires a reciprocal relationship among humanity and the other forms of life that comprise nature. Species that require freshwater (including humanity) rely on a tiny percentage (less than 3%) of all water available on Earth. This limited amount of freshwater cannot be replenished if contaminated beyond recovery.

# CLIMATE CRISIS – SIGNS OF A COMING CATASTROPHE?

A humanitarian crisis caused by climate change is already unfolding. The current climate crisis is symptomatic of a potentially catastrophic ecological breakdown and represents a profound rupture in the reciprocal relationship between modern civilizations and nature.

A minority of wealthy people in the world are responsible for global warming. Nations in the global north have emitted the majority of carbon in history. Just 100 companies have been the source of more than 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since 1988. However, the burden of climate consequences will affect everyone.

Rising temperatures caused by global warming changes weather patterns, creates extreme weather events, melts glacial reservoirs, causes floods and droughts, raises sea levels, and will have enormous consequences for human settlements. The climate crisis will precipitate a water crisis for many people with unfair, disproportionate impacts on peoples who experience the intersectionalities of low socio-economic status, and who are female, very young, very old, and/or from Indigenous and racialized communities.

## The Challenges

Creating equality among peoples and a reciprocal relationship with nature are impossible to achieve through reform of colonial governments and capitalist economies. This form of social organization, reinforced by white supremacy and patriarchy, dominates global relations and is designed to exploit the majority of people and nature's gifts in order to create private wealth for a privileged few. Colonial governments and transnational corporations are designed to enclose nature's riches, and transform them into commodities and private property. Colonialism violently dispossesses Indigenous peoples of their relationship with the land and water, while covertly and overtly pursuing oppression and genocide. Colonialism is not only 'history', but an ongoing project expropriating Indigenous land, while ignoring or extinguishing inherent treaty and human rights. Transnational corporations, together with the governments they depend on, act as modern colonial powers when they take over resources from countries in the global south. This is also true in countries in the global north as the issue of water clearly shows.

Capitalism's imperative of endless growth and consumption creates polluting waste while extracting life from land and water faster than it can be replenished. Capitalist societies exploit the labour of working people, and keep people excluded from the labour market in poverty. However, inequality and separation from Mother Earth are not natural and must be maintained through oppression and violence. White supremacy serves colonialism and capitalism by allocating privilege based on superficial racial characteristics to normalize oppression, violence and incarceration of people of Indigenous and racialized communities. Patriarchy assigns privilege based on gender and sexual orientation. Inequality among peoples and a severed relationship from nature are intentional products, not failures of colonialism and capitalism. It may be easier for those who benefit from or are protected from this inequality to deny the climate crisis, or believe their wealth and privilege will protect them from the worst impacts. It may be easier for those who benefit to be fatalistic, where imagining the end of the world is easier than imagining the end of capitalism. The wealthy may simply believe the 'fantasy of endless growth' as Greta Thunberg accused world leaders at the United Nations. Or according to Winona LaDuke as she referenced Wiindigo, the cannibal monster of Anishinaabe legend, all capacity for reason has been lost to addiction in indulged desires.

## **Moving away from colonialism and capitalism and towards just relationships among people and a reciprocal relationship with nature is a radical act.**

People who benefit from colonial government, capitalist societies and white supremacy face difficult choices. We are inevitably complicit with and dependent on the benefits that injustices in these societies create. Choosing to drastically reduce consumption of the material comforts the ruptured relationship with nature provides is difficult, even as we know, feel and see the risks of this dependence. The choice to move from oppression and exploitation towards liberation and sustainable living within nature begins with personal choices to move away from fear of and/or dependence on the benefits colonialism and capitalism provide. Creating or recreating forms of governance and economy that create equality among peoples and a reciprocal relationship with Mother Earth requires creativity, courage and democratic participation. Relationships based in equality operate with democratic consent, not oppression. Choosing non-cooperation with and resistance to colonialism and capitalism are ways to withhold consent. Moving away from them is a radical act and the first step in moving towards equality and a reciprocal relationship with nature. Leaving an oppressive and exploitative relationship is a way to deprive the oppressor of 'power over'. Choosing relationships based on justice among people and a reciprocal relationship with nature can evoke fear in the powerful and incite aggression and violence. In these instances, it is necessary to defend life.

## **CONCLUSION: REASONS FOR HOPE**

Nature is oriented towards renewal and the regeneration of life. Ironically, the current 'fever' of climate change is a way in which nature moderates the behaviour of a parasite that seeks to consume its host. On the eternal trajectory of geological time, the climate crisis is a brief adjustment in nature's re-balancing. While catastrophe for humanity is a possibility, nature is resilient and given a chance, an ecological apocalypse can be avoided. Scientists tell us that while the current levels of carbon emissions guarantee there will be serious impacts, there is still time to reduce the amount of damage and the degree of suffering that will be caused. Just as human activity is the cause of climate change, collective action can also move us towards justice and life, and away from injustice and catastrophe. The COVID-19 pandemic, impactful as it is, will ultimately be revealed to be a more minor emergency than the cascading effects of the climate crisis. Many nations took urgent and effective action, informed by science, to mobilize people and public resources to protect public health. People acted in solidarity to meet the emergency, and to support and care for each other through mutual aid. Hope requires a critical view of the interests that create injustice and the strategies necessary to contend with these interests. Science prepares us to understand the ecological causes and remedies of the climate crisis. Indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge and stewardship of land and water provides lessons on how to realign our relationship to live within nature, not over it. The history of Indigenous peoples' resistance to colonialism, African peoples' resistance to slavery and the advocacy of modern social movements for justice and human rights provide lessons on how to confront the power of colonial governments and capitalist states. **The story of how humanity contends with the climate crisis is not yet written. There is still time to restore just relationships among people and a reciprocal relationship with nature and live in peace with each other and with Mother Earth.**

Email us to share your thoughts and  
join the conversation at  
[waterjustice@waterwatchers.ca](mailto:waterjustice@waterwatchers.ca)



PEOPLE'S WATER CAMPAIGN  
WATER FOR LIFE – NOT PROFIT

wellington *Water* watchers.ca