



Maude Barlow: The Growing Battle for the Right to Water

By Tara Lohan, AlterNet

Posted on February 14, 2008, Printed on June 13, 2008

<http://www.alternet.org/story/76819/>

From Chile to the Philippines to South Africa to her home country of Canada, Maude Barlow is one of a few people who truly understands the scope of the world's water woes. Her newest book, *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water*, details her discoveries around the globe about our diminishing water resources, the increasing privatization trend and the grassroots groups that are fighting back against corporate theft, government mismanagement and a changing climate.

If you want to know where the water is running low (including 36 U.S. states), why we haven't been able to protect it and what we can do to ensure everyone has the right to water, Barlow's book is an essential read. It is part science, part policy and part impassioned call. And the information in *Blue Covenant* couldn't come from a more reliable source. Barlow is the national chairperson of the Council of Canadians and co-founder of the [Blue Planet Project](#), which is instrumental in the international community in working for the right to water for all people. She also authored *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop Corporate Theft of the World's Water* with Tony Clarke. And she's the recipient of the Right Livelihood Award (known as the "Alternative Nobel") for her global water justice work.

She took a moment to talk to AlterNet in between the Canadian and U.S. legs of a book tour for *Blue Covenant*. (Barlow just kicked off her U.S. tour; for a list of tour stops and dates, click [here](#)).

Tara Lohan: This year in the U.S. there has been a whole lot press about the drought in Atlanta and the Southeast, and I think for a lot of people in the U.S. it is the first they are hearing about drought, but the crisis here in North America is really pretty extreme isn't it?

Maude Barlow: It really is, and it kind of surprises me when I hear people, for instance in Atlanta say, "We didn't know it was coming." I don't know how that could be possible, and I do have to say that I blame our political leaders. I don't understand how they could not have been reading what I've been reading and what anyone who is watching this has been reading.

I remember attending a conference in Boise, Idaho, three years ago and hearing a lot of scientists get up and say, "Read my lips, this isn't a drought, this is permanent drying out." We are overpumping the Ogallala, Lake Powell and Lake Meade. The back up systems are now being depleted. This is by no means a drought ...

The thing that I'm trying to establish with the first chapter, which is called "Where Has All the Water Gone," is that what we learned in grade five about the hydrologic cycle being a closed, fixed cycle that could never be interrupted and could never go anywhere, is not true. They weren't lying to us, but they weren't aware of the human capacity to destroy it, and the reality is that we've interrupted the hydrologic cycle in many parts of the world and the American Southwest is one of them.

TL: How is this happening?

MB: By farming in deserts and taking up water from aquifers or watersheds. Or by urbanizing -- massive urbanization causes the hydrologic cycle to not function correctly because rain needs to fall back on green stuff -- vegetation and grass -- so that the process can repeat itself. Or we are sending huge amounts of water from large watersheds to megacities and some of them are 10 to 20 million people, and if those cities are on the ocean, some of that water gets dumped into the ocean. It is not returned to the cycle.

We are massively polluting surface water, so that the water may be there, but we can't use it. And we are also mining groundwater faster than it can be replenished by nature, which means we are not allowing the cycle to renew itself. The Ogallala aquifer is one example of massive overpumping. There are bore wells in the Lake Michigan shore that go as deep into the ground as Chicago skyscrapers go into the ground and they are sucking groundwater that should be feeding the lake so hard that they are pulling up lake water now, and they are reversing the flow of water in Lake Michigan for the first time.

We are interrupting the natural cycle. And another thing we are doing is something called virtual water trade. That is where you send water out of the watershed in the form of products or agriculture. You've used the water to produce something and then you export it, and about 20 percent of water used in the world is exported out of watershed in this way, because so much of our economy is about export. In the U.S. you are sending about one-third of your water out of watersheds -- it is not sustainable.

This is not a cyclical drought. We are actually creating hot stains, as I and some scientists call them, around the world. These are parts of the world that are running out of water and will be, or are, in crisis. Which means that millions more people will be without water. I argue that this is one of the causes of global warming. We usually hear water being a result of climate change, and it is, particularly with the melting of the glaciers. But our abuse, mismanagement and treatment of water is actually one of the causes, and we have not placed that analysis at the center of our thinking about climate change and environmental destruction, and until we do, we are only addressing half the question.

I do blame in a very big way, the political leadership in most of our countries for having failed to heed the call of scientists and ecologists and water managers who've been telling us for years now there is a crisis coming -- there are 36 states in the U.S. in some form of water stress, from serious to severe. Thirty-six states! Most Americans don't know this -- why is this not part of people's everyday concerns? That is what I'm hoping this book will help do.

TL: Do you think governments, like the U.S. or Canada, have any kind of a contingency plan?

MB: No. There are people in the U.S. who believe Canada is the contingency plant. Or Northeast water or Alaska water. So, moving water is one of the contingency plans, likely by pipeline. You could also ship it by tanker. Other than that, no. And not only are there no backup plans, but there is not even an understanding that you've got to stop increasing the demand on water. In the U.S., people are moving into the very area of the country that has no water -- a huge migration is taking place to the American Southwest where they're building more golf courses.

I just read about a new water theme park in Arizona that will have waves so big you can have serious surfers, like real surfing in the desert. There is just this lack of understanding about how nature works, how the hydrologic cycle needs to be protected and how watersheds need to be protected, and when you start playing god by moving this stuff around like this we are just creating this massive crisis. There is not enough water for the demands being made on it in the American Southwest.

TL: You said 36 states in the U.S. are water stressed -- what does that actually mean for the people who live there?

MB: Well, in a dire case, literally running out of water. In many other cases, the predictions are that the demand will increase seriously and they've got to start planning. I quote in the book that the demand in Florida is growing so much and overpumping is happening so much that there are actually sink holes opening up and swallowing homes and streets and sometimes whole shopping centers. It is called subsidence. Mexico City is sinking in on itself because all the water under the city has been taken out and now they are going farther afield pumping water.

It can go from that kind of crisis, or as in some communities in the Midwest, you face having no water to the Chicago area, where the demand is going to grow hugely, and therefore the demand will be on the Great Lakes, which are already in trouble. There are four trillion liters taken out of the Great Lakes every single day and believe me, nature is not putting a trillion gallons back in. It is not rocket science that we are not allowing nature to refill and replenish. And now there are new demands on the Great Lakes because communities and industries off the basin are now demanding access to it.

TL: You mentioned global warming earlier, and I just want to come back to that for a moment. Are we approaching climate change in the wrong way by not recognizing its connection to water?

MB: Yes.

TL: So what should we be doing?

MB: Well, we have to put it into the equation. I've found that some politicians are actually using global warming as an excuse not to do anything, and I'll give you an example. It is the polar opposite of the Bush administration, which is that global warming doesn't exist. In Australia, which thankfully has gone through a government

change, they are disengaging the water from the countryside and letting farmers sell it through brokers, they are disrupting streams and aquifers. They are draining the wetlands. They are privatizing. They are doing all sorts of things wrong, including overusing and polluting it, and so on. And what did the prime minister say? "It's got nothing to do with anything we're doing; it's global warming, and it blew here from away -- we didn't even create it."

I think global warming is becoming a little bit of a catch all for some governments to do nothing or to put off a solution to other things until they find a solution to global warming, and there is no excuse. Right now we have got to stop the abuse of water. The single most important thing that we can do for global warming, aside from stopping the overpumping of greenhouse gas emissions, but the twin to that is to retain water in watersheds. Because the hydrologic cycle is what cools the temperature.

Global warming can be averted through a great extent if we could maintain watersheds and maintain the cycle in its purest form. That means keeping green spaces, building green rings around urban centers -- everything from parks and gardens -- stop polluting, stop overmining groundwater and retain water in watersheds, which means we have to live more sustainably, we have to grow our food differently, we have to stop believing in unlimited growth and more stuff and more competition, and all of that.

I find that global warming is such a crisis that we won't do anything on any other front because all our attention is going there. I think we are terribly missing the boat on this, and I'm very interested in getting a debate going on this in the climate-change community so that when people are talking about the causes of climate change, our drying up of the earth from below will be considered as serious a cause as the trapping of heat from greenhouse gas emissions. It is not only part of the analysis we are missing, but part of the solution.

TL: That is interesting. I haven't heard a lot of people talking about it from that angle.

MB: Nobody.

I'm working with a group of scientists in Slovakia and a few other places, voices in the wilderness, but when you start putting it together, honestly, it makes such sense. I mean if you start to look at the growth of deserts -- in the last 30 years we've doubled the growth of deserts in the world, and it will double again in 20 years. Well, if you are creating deserts and you've got heat rising from the earth with urban heat islands, the inability for the hydrologic cycle to be maintained because of urbanization, it makes a lot of sense. Of course that is all exacerbated by melting glaciers and the lowering of the ice packs, which protects from evaporation. It is kind of a deadly combination. I spoke at a conference about this recently in London, England, and was received by people from the climate change world, really, really well, and I thought "This is a good sign."

TL: You spent a lot of time in this book, and also in *Blue Gold*, talking about privatization. Can you talk a little about why we should be concerned about it?

MB: Well, as water dwindles in the world and available fresh water is becoming more scarce, the demand is growing, water is becoming a commodity, it is becoming valuable to those who want to put a price on it, which is why I called the first book *Blue Gold*. And this blue gold is attracting private sector interest in many, many ways, and there is a private sector interest coming together to control every level of water, from when we take it out of the ground, bottle it, to how we deliver it, to wastewater treatment, and now the biggest and newest is water reuse and recycling. That sounds benign at first, but when you really start to look at it, really it is about big, big corporations like GE, Dow Chemical, Proctor & Gamble getting into the ownership, control, and recycling of dirty water, which because there are billions of dollars at stake, in my opinion, becomes a disincentive to protect source water. And you can start to understand why governments, in collusion with these companies, are starting to spend millions of dollars on cleanup technology but will not enforce rules to stop pollution in the first place.

And then we have desalination. There are 30 desal plants planned for California alone. They are now talking about nuclear-powered desalination. They are talking about building those plants as we speak. The people in the anti-nuclear movement had better dust off and come back because it is all coming back with desalination. And then there is nanotechnology, which they want to be totally deregulated. I've got a great quote in the book where this guy says, "We are going to do to water what we did to telecommunications in the 1990s," which is total deregulation. They want governments out of the business of water.

I have a whole section in the book on how water has become such a hot commodity. When I wrote *Blue Gold* there was no water being exchanged on the Stock Exchange, now there are over a dozen indexes just for trading water. It has become a multi-multibillion-dollar industry just overnight. A lot of it is this water reuse -- it is the fast-growing section of the water industry. I argue that there is a race going on over who's going to control water, whether it will be seen as a public commons, a public trust, and part of our collective heritage that also belongs to the earth -- or whether it will be controlled by private corporations, and I don't know who will win.

TL: But it is not all bad news.

MB: No, we are making good inroads in the bottled water area -- a lot of universities, high schools, are having drives to reject bottled water. We're getting restaurants now taking the challenge up to not serve bottled water, and we're getting people to take a pledge not to drink bottled water.

There has been a huge fight back from the big utility companies, particularly in the global south, to the extent that Suez has basically announced it is going to leave Latin America because people are so furious with them, which has been the result of fabulous grass-roots activism. So, it is not that this is a done deal, but most of the our governments are supportive of these private-sector incursions.

It is all about technology and not about lifestyle and alternative ways and decreasing growth and stuff -- they are saying we are not going to challenge the model, it is unlimited growth, continued competition, continued economical globalization, continued privatization, continued deregulation -- we'll just continue to find ways to

clean up the mess as we go along.

TL: Water is not just an environmental issue, but a national security issue, you discovered with this book.

MB: Yes, water has become an issue of national security in the U.S. Six years ago I couldn't find any inkling at the national level -- the Pentagon or White House -- of a coming water crisis, either globally or in the U.S. But in the last, two to three years, this has been hugely changed. There is now a consortium advising the Bush administration and the Pentagon -- it is called Global Water Futures. It is made up of this think tank called the Center for International Studies and Sandia Laboratories. Then I dug deeper and found it is being contracted out to be run by Lockheed Martin. And this consortium involves Coke and Proctor & Gamble and others. So you finally have the U.S. government saying, "Holy crap, we're in trouble here, you can't be a super power if you don't have energy and water." Now they've got this advisory body that not only has this think tank and the corporate side too, and the high technology side, and the military side. It becomes very clear what you are dealing with.

TL: Can you talk more about the grass-roots resistance to all of this?

MB: The thing that is so stunning, especially in the global south, is that when you are dealing with water, you are dealing with life and death. For a lot of people it is like, "Well, we didn't know what to do when they privatized our education or shut down our public hospitals -- but water is different." They are willing to go the wall for it -- as one person said to me, "You may as well kill me with a bullet as dirty water." People just take a stand and are determined they are not going to compromise.

We took the time as a movement ... whenever anybody always asks me how to build a campaign, I always include these steps. We took the time to find language that we all jointly agreed on -- that water is not a commodity, that it belongs to the earth and all species, it is a public trust and human right, and so on. We've taken the time to work this out so that if you ask any of us around the world, you are going to hear the same kind of language. There is a trust that we have built in this shared philosophy and shared vision.

TL: How is it that you've managed to create such a worldwide message and come together?

MB: Part of the origin was when I wrote a report for the International Forum on Globalization back in 1999. It was called *Blue Gold: The Global Water Crisis and the Commodification of the World's Water Supply*. It took off, and a bunch of people from around the world started reading it. We got it translated into many, many languages, and I started hearing from people saying, "I thought this was personal and we were fighting this particular company in our community, and we didn't know that this was a global fight."

So, to my knowledge, that was the first analysis, and that morphed into the book. I started traveling and meeting people and Food & Water Watch got set up in the U.S. And then there was meeting people in Europe who were fighting big water companies, coming together at the big World Water Forum and bringing folks

together from the global south to challenge what we call the "lords of water." And, of course, technology has been incredible. You don't have to have a computer in every house -- you just have to have somebody on the other end who has the capacity to receive this information.

TL: What else do we need to be doing?

MB: We need laws. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Legislation won't change the heart, but it will restrain the heartless." We need legislation at every level of our government. It is all well for grass-roots people to do all their wonderful work -- but they shouldn't have to do all the work. We need laws at every level, from municipal up to state to national to international, that protect water ecologically on one hand and protect the notion of a human right and right of the earth, and not a commodity, and that is so fundamental.

That is why I call the book "blue covenant" -- we need a covenant of three parts -- from humans to the earth to stop destroying the lifeblood of the earth, from the rich to the poor (global north to the south) for water justice, not charity -- justice. Water should be a fundamental right for all generations, and no one should be allowed to sell it for profit. We want this right up to the United Nations. It is a struggle at every level. But we just keep going. The fight back around the world is claiming space, but we have to have the weight of law behind us. We have to make, as a society, decisions about what matters. And if we believe that people shouldn't die because they can't afford water, then we have to bring things to bear to make that happen -- we have to change things. If the World Bank has money to give to Suez or Veolia, they've got the money to give to a public agency.

TL: So are you hopeful we can move change in the right direction?

MB: I'm always hopeful -- it is part of my job. I consider hope to be a moral imperative, and I also don't think you have any right to go around alarming people with these facts unless you are also prepared to talk about what needs to be done, and success stories, and be hopeful. I am very very hopeful that we can collectively do this.

If I'm worried -- it is about the exponential abuse of water -- can we catch this and stop it fast enough?

For a list of stops and dates for Barlow's book tour, click [here](#).

Tara Lohan is a managing editor at AlterNet.

© 2008 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved.

View this story online at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/76819/>