BLUE PLANET
TARGETS COMMODIFICATION
OF WORLD'S WATER

by Patrick Bond and Karen Bakker
Vancouver, Canada

The July 5-8 "Blue Planet" conference in Vancouver opened with a call by Maude Barlow to promote "a global water revolution. This is the first of many international civil society meetings to take back control of our water." The host Council of Canadians, a 100,000-member citizens' group, was joined by several hundred representatives of indigenous peoples, Third World communities, anti-globalization activists, radical youth, public-sector trade unions, environmentalists, anti-dam campaigners, World Bank watchers, and consumer groups.

Barlow, the Council chairperson, was in the news in April for helping turn out "Maude's Mobs" of middle-class Canadians to the Quebec City protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas. For several years, she and Tony Clarke of Polaris Institute have fused citizens'-rights respectability with surprisingly radical rhetoric against the ravaging of Canada by corporations and pocketed politicians. Barlow and Clarke recently supported local activists in Vancouver as they fought off a privatised wastewater treatment plant.

In contrast to previous criticisms that the Council has been excessively nationalist, this conference recreated the internationalist spirit of the Porto Alegre World Social Forum. Aiming directly at next year's tenth anniversary of the UN Conference on Environment and Development, Blue Planet took on corporate globalization more generally, posing routes that lead from multi-faceted resistance to alternative conceptions of water management.

The trends in virtually all countries are towards the commodification and privatization of water. Blue Planet promotes a radical manifesto and global treaty as seminal documents in the international fight-back. The manifesto stresses the essential nature of water to life and to social and ecosystem integrity, and identifies cultural resonances and the sense of the sacred associated with water in various spiritual traditions. Aboriginal communities played a key role in framing the debate during the conference.

Getting governments to sign up to the treaty, it is hoped, will be a rallying cry and political tool for the movement. The documents provide a broad-based way of arguing for water as a human right, and will have universal applicability in sites of struggle around the world.

Indeed, five scales of water struggle are, in the process, being fused: local communities, national governments, world water policy fora, sites of global rule such as Free Trade Agreements and

the Bretton Woods Institutions, and the more general takeover of water by multinational corporations.

Solidarity with campaigns underway in a variety of Third World settings represented at the conference--Ghana, India, Bolivia, Mexico, South Africa, Guatemala, Colombia, Tanzania, Slovakia, Honduras, Philippines, Mozambique, Indonesia, as well as First Nations within North America-received serious attention.

The concerns included damage from mega-dams and cross-catchment water transfers, despoilation of groundwater and aquifers, municipal water privatisation, tariff price hikes and "water poverty," agribusiness abuse of water in the wake of the irrigation-guzzling green revolution, global warming/drying, worsening droughts and floods, scarcity and wastage, and the extension of corporate bill-of-rights protections to water via the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and Free Trade Agreement of the Americas.

Canada is a poignant host for some of these issues. The week before the conference, Mike Harris--conservative leader of Canada's main province, Ontario--was a witness at a judicial hearing on the seven deaths and thousands of poisonings at the town of Walkerton last year.

He was explicitly asked whether his "ideology" of privatisation was to blame, given that testing the town's water for E.coli was outsourced to a local firm. It failed to do so and attempted a cover-up. Harris was in full denial mode too, but Canadians got the point.

Other local struggles include anti-dam fights in Quebec and British Columbia, resistance to bulk sales of water to the US, and campaigns to bring services to indigenous peoples who suffer Third World water poverty in one of the world's richest countries.

Water can become a locus of the anti-globalization movement, some speakers contended, for several reasons. Water struggles tend to bridge traditional red/green divides, link North and South in solidarity, endorse the notion of a global Commons that mustn't be privatised, focus on the public (especially municipal government) character of service delivery, involve the expansion of the service through expanded labour and jobs, and offer a way to practice local self-management and sustainable consumption.

Thus if water becomes a public good protected from the market, it also serves a progressive political trend towards an expansive eco-social localism, unlike the establishment's faddish "communitarianism" which leads inexorably to gated-community protections.

It is only by confronting issues of more general concern to the movement against corporate globalization that the water struggles will come to fruition. Targets thus emerge in the form of the World Bank/IMF, utilities undergoing commercialization, big government aid agencies, powerful water multinationals like Suez and Vivendi which dominate the global market in water supply provision, Free Trade Agreements and neoliberal advocacy agencies.

Key enemies of Blue Planet include the pro-privatisation World Water Council (a platform for major water firms); the Global Water Partnership (initiated by senior World Bank staff);

Business Partners for Development (an industry/World Bank promoter of privatization); the GATS as a lever for water companies to invade Third World countries; and other advocates of the Dublin Principles and Hague Declaration, which advance the proposition that water is mainly an economic good.

These players will be key targets of protesters at the World Bank/IMF meeting in Washington in early October and at the Rio+10 conference in Johannesburg in September 2002, as well as at related meetings in Bonn later this year and follow-ups at Kyoto in 2003 and Montreal in 2006.

In contrast, groups and events promoting water decommodification include the P-7 Declaration on Water authored by Vandana Shiva, the Cochabamba Declaration emanating from the Coordinada struggle of low-income residents against water-privatiser Bechtel in Bolivia, and the Global Water Contract of the Group of Lisbon social democrats.

But even if the main contradiction between North and South in this sector, is that the former already have water infrastructure networks in place, and the latter must still expand access to more than a billion people without potable water and decent sanitation, the process of commodification is similar.

Those with the networks--including residents of most Third World cities' elite neighbourhoods--will have to begin addressing overconsumption; those without must address the need for provision of a free lifeline supply of water for, at minimum, subsistence purposes. (Not just a matter for households, in which women would benefit most, this might also include small-scale irrigation in the context of radical land and agricultural reform.)

Here, perhaps, the only real cleavage emerged. For most of the world, the human right to a subsistence water supply must ultimately occur on a free "lifeline" basis.

This demand has led, for example, South African campaigners in the SA Municipal Workers Union and Rural Development Services Network to only partially endorse the African National Congress electoral promise late last year to give a free 6,000 litres a month to each family--half what campaigners insist upon. (In early July the promise was meant to come into effect, though it did only for a tiny minority of consumers, not for the poor rural women who need it most, for example.)

But a free lifeline supply would not mean the right to lifestyles which in the wealthy North, are insensitive to real--not just socially-constructed--water scarcity. Such scarcity comes from pollution-intensive industrial practices, water-wasting domestic appliances, and more fundamentally from poorly-located urban areas such as Johannesburg, far from natural bodies of fresh water. But scarcity is also a reflection of aquifer degradation, which is common in most urban areas.

Commented Barlow, "When we have a famine somewhere, our response is not, `Oh goody, customers for life!', yet that is exactly the way the scarcity argument is playing out when it comes to water." Or, as Shiva put it on the first night of the conference, "Sustainable development is capitalism's way of turning the threat of ecological crisis into an opportunity."

Capitalism has colonised the life world so thoroughly that the alleged ability of private companies to fix system leaks and provide more efficient services has become common sense.

But such conventional wisdom can be undone. Typical red/green conflicts pit jobs against protection of resources from extraction. Water does not have this feature, and so transcends the (usually false) paradox between equity and efficiency that plagues attempts to bring together social justice and environmental justice concerns.

The conference was dedicated to the struggle of the Colombian anti-dam activist Kimy Pernia Domico, who was abducted two days before departing for Canada for his keynote speech. The conference closed with a vibrant demonstration organised by youth activists at the Colombian consulate in downtown Vancouver.

(See http://www.canadians.org for Blue Planet information. Patrick Bond is based in Johannesburg at Wits University's Municipal Services Project--pbond@wn.apc.org--and Karen Bakker is doing a post-doctoral study of water privatisation at the University of Oxford's School of Geography and the Environment--karen.bakker@geog.ox.ac.uk)