

# The Marseille Water Ethic: toward a cultural and spiritual approach to water

## Introduction

Water is life. It is the blood-line of our planet. It creates, develops and nurtures the entire community of life. It unites us, and at times, it divides us.

The current technical approach to water management, materialistic and anthropocentric in nature, is simply not working. Plastic islands are being formed in the ocean, habitats are being lost, species are disappearing, and the most vulnerable are not getting access to safe drinking water. This is a clear human rights and environmental justice issue: those who are profiting from mismanagement are not the same as those who are feeling the consequences.

We need practical alternatives, alternatives that acknowledge the deep spiritual and cultural importance of water, and yet also based in principles such as justice and equity, care and compassion, stewardship and neighborliness, and concern for the entire community of life. We need ethical alternatives.

A society's ethical ideals are at the core of its vision of the common good and give insight into its hopes for the future. In a deeply interdependent but vulnerable world, they help us take responsible action to address shared problems. By ethics, we mean the domain of inquiry that examines claims about what is right or wrong, and when responsibility attaches to human action. The sources of these claims may arise from both religious and non-religious traditions, including indigenous knowledge and cultural practices.

Many of the principles below are the result of the *Relato* methodology of the Biosphere Ethics Initiative, which highlights examples of ethics in action, documented in a particular place, at a particular time.

## I. Foundational Worldview- where are we coming from?

1. Humanity's Dependence on Nature - We live within and are utterly dependent upon the biosphere, which we understand as a diverse and dynamic system with natural limits that human societies must respect. Everything is interdependent with everything else.
2. Humanity and Humility – humanity must have humility with our understanding and our ability to manage water. Water is powerful and must be respected: when there is too much, tsunamis can occur and destroy homes and lives, like in Japan, 2011; or like the mudslides in Nova Friburgo, 2011. When there is too little, drought (and with it, disease), like in Kenya 2011; or the farmfields that failed and the wildfires that burned in the United States in 2011.
3. Ecological Integrity - We value the ecological integrity of the biosphere and its diversity of interacting ecosystems and species, independently of other values that humans place on them.
4. Climate change is creating new ethical implications, exacerbating drought and desertification, as well as creating new vulnerable groups, such as ecological refugees and small island nations.
5. Water Prices Create Greater Inequities – As water becomes scarcer, prices will go up, hurting small farmers and allowing unfair advantages to large agri-businesses, the largest users of freshwater.
6. Strength in Diversity - differences in language, belief, and practice, or bio-cultural diversity, are necessary for biological evolution, support scientific knowledge, and nurture solutions to our shared problems.

## II. Aims – what do we hope to achieve?

1. *Liberty* = protect and provide for a flourishing life, peace, public access to water, public access to courts, public access to information pertaining to water health, and keeping water and those that depend upon it free from harm
2. *Equality* = water justice and water equity:
  - Just Governance - Advance just and sustainable forms of local, regional, state, and global governance, including those that uphold decision-making that is participatory, inclusive, self-critical, and democratic; foster local and regional alliances which recognize the knowledge and understanding that each has to contribute; and support efforts to recognize and implement the rights of nature by ensuring that nature is represented in decision-making on policies at all levels that affect the living world.
  - Just Economies - Establish economies rooted in ecological realities, recognizing natural limits and reflecting the diverse ways in which we understand and value our relationships with nature.
  - Just Development and Consumption – Richness is just as problematic as poverty, and a universally fair manner of human development and consumption patterns, that share both the burdens and the benefits, must be promoted.
  - Environmental Education - Promote an environmental literacy campaign that permeates all disciplines, professions, and educational levels.

3. *Fraternity* = strong local governance and grassroots citizenship, diversity in culture, solidarity with past, present and future generations, protect the vulnerable people and places

### **III. Ethical Principles – what principles should guide our behavior?**

1. Celebrate water, and the leaders and achievements that ensure its protection.
2. The interests of the community, of the common good, should be promoted over self-interest.
3. Local governance and grassroots activism is integral to water management.
4. Water protection can only be achieved alongside social upliftment.
5. Both animals and humans have sacred spaces in nature that are vital to their lives and healthy development.
6. We must build trust among generations, cultures and professions, and share our wisdom.
7. Play in and around water is vital to the healthy development of children and adults.
8. The media has a particular ethical role in environmental education, impact and empowerment because of their purpose and reach; their responsibilities are directly linked to a citizen's right to know.
9. Ecological solidarity between humans and nature, with the obligation to respect and the compassion of love, is the basis for genuine care of living beings, places and people: love for the beauty and gift of the natural world with all of its living diversity; love for our places and our homes; and love for the people of today and tomorrow.
10. It is dangerous for the future of life to commodify life.
11. Scientific research, and the application of scientific knowledge, is not value-neutral.
12. Water scarcity provides an opportunity for local, regional and international cooperation; it is an opportunity for peace and cooperation, not a validation for war and competition.
13. We need to look for models of sustainable living in history and in other countries, such as ancient water harvesting techniques.
14. All affected parties – women, minorities, refugees – must have a voice in decision-making.
15. We can learn from those cultures and religions that view water as sacred, as spiritual.
16. We must create spaces for ethical engagement, democratic engagement and dialogue.
17. Individuals, private corporations and states each have common but differentiated responsibilities to protect this life-source.
18. If we protect the vulnerable people, places, species, and societies, we protect everyone and everything.

### **IV. Ethical Engagement (questions) – what questions should be asked?**

1. Who, if anyone, owns water? Can water be owned? Should water be owned?
2. Is there a human right to water? If so, how can a state or international body guarantee this right?
3. What is your (individual, government, industry) fair share of water that does not compromise the existence of other life?
4. What obligations should societies and individuals assume in recognition of the pressures that our growing population place on one another and the biosphere?
5. How can we sustain the integrity of the biosphere, with water its very bloodline, without much greater equality in economic opportunities and incomes?
6. How do we support the common good alongside individual ambition, within a society dominated by privatization and those seeking excessive power?
7. What kind of domestic and international law systems do we need to empower institutions to respect, support, and implement the Marseille Water Ethic?
8. How do we counter short-term economic arguments against biodiversity conservation with the long-term thinking required in ethical inquiry?

### **V. Solutions – what do we recommend?**

1. Ethical engagement can provide a common ground to bring partners of different backgrounds together: local and global, private and public, individual and community.
2. In its duty to protect the general welfare, governments must promote an environmental awareness campaign so that citizens are aware of water pollution and scarcity issues and they can act more responsibly as individuals and as decision-makers.
3. Priority of state and global resource allocation should be given to the most immediately vulnerable people: the poor, refugees, victims of drought and desertification, small island nations.
4. Water scarce countries should create water-focused climate change action plans.
5. Countries should develop a water management plan for future allocation that involves all stakeholders and determines a fair water allocation, with guidance from customary international law and the practice of other states.
6. For water disputes, principles of fair distributive justice should guide future allocation. Note that distributive justice does not mean equal allocation, but rather determines why some get more water than others.
7. Corporations should move away from clientelism and towards a network relations model.
8. Corporate social responsibility should be a legal requirement, and not a charitable donation.