



## World's Water Supply at Risk

By Kevin Danaher and Shannon Biggs and Jason Mark, PoliPoint Press

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*The following conversation is an excerpt from the new book Building the Green Economy: Success Stories from the Grassroots (PoliPointPress, 2007) by Kevin Danaher, Shannon Biggs, and Jason Mark. You can read more about the book [here](#).*

Maude Barlow is possibly the world's leading expert on water struggles. She is the national chairperson of the Council of Canadians, that country's largest citizen's advocacy group, with members and chapters across Canada. She is a director with the International Forum on Globalization, a San Francisco research and education institution opposed to corporate globalization. In 2005, she received the prestigious "Right Livelihood Award," given by the Swedish Parliament and widely referred to as "The Alternative Nobel." She has received honorary doctorates from six universities and has authored or co-authored 15 books, including *Too Close For Comfort: Canada's Future Within Fortress North America*; and *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop Corporate Theft of the World's Water* (with Tony Clarke). Her most recent book is *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Fight for the Right to Water*.

### **Q: What are the greatest threats to local water supplies?**

Maude Barlow: First of all, we are creating an ecological crisis by not taking care of our water supplies. Surface waters are being polluted, and we are mining our groundwater at unsustainable rates. At the very time when corporations are privatizing everything, our governments are allowing corporations to move in and take over the ownership of essential resources like water.

So we have a double whammy: Our governments are allowing corporations to pollute our water, and then they are signing contracts with corporations to bring in clean-up technology and make billions of dollars cleaning it up. The very sector of society that is polluting our water is turning around and selling our water back to us. And this is going to be more and more of an issue in the future. We'll be increasingly drinking water that has been polluted by corporations, then cleaned up by corporations, then bottled and sold to us by corporations.

### **Q: What are some success stories of people protecting their water?**

MB: The people of Uruguay held a plebiscite and got enough votes for a referendum in the national election in October 2004 in which they called for a constitutional amendment saying that water is a human right, and they won. The government was forced to change its constitution, and Uruguay became the first country in the world to vote on whether people have a human right to water, and the private companies were forced out.

There have been quite a few successful fight-backs across North America. The city

of Atlanta allowed a private company to come in to run its water system, and the city kicked them out two and a half years into a 20-year contract. They said, "Get out. You lied. The water coming out of the taps is brown, and you raised the price. Get out." We kept private water companies from taking over the water systems in Toronto and Vancouver. There's a big movement in the heart of France, led by Danielle Mitterand, the widow of the former French president, Francois Mitterand. She is leading this fight to bring water under public control, and many city mayors of some good-sized towns and cities -- not yet Paris -- are backing her. So even in the belly of the beast, there are some exciting movements.

**Q: What about the struggle against Coca-Cola in India?**

MB: When you dig deep into Coca-Cola's practices, you see it's really a bad company. They are using military satellite imagery to find clean sources of groundwater and then going in -- often in poor tribal communities -- and setting up a plant and just helping themselves to the water until the water is gone. I call it water mining. We're working with folks in the state of Kerala, India, who have taken the Coca-Cola company all the way to their Supreme Court to fight the way Coke comes in and sucks up massive amounts of groundwater, pollutes it with sweeteners and chemical additives, and then makes huge profits selling this nonnutritious drink to the public. The Supreme Court of India has ruled largely in the people's favor. Yet Coke is still fighting; they refuse to give up. But these grassroots activists don't give up, either. It's been a real successful fight-back against Coca-Cola.

**Q: Does it seem to you that the United States and Canada are more, or less, water-conscious than people in other nations?**

MB: Individually, we are terrible water-guzzlers. We use a great deal of water per capita through our industrial practices, agriculture, mining, and, in my country, through oil extraction from tar sands. We take a little better care of our groundwater than many Third World countries because we citizens have a little more control; the corporations tend to be from our countries, and we can exert greater influence on them. There is serious pollution -- I'm not suggesting there isn't -- but we don't see the kind of blatant pollution you see in many poor countries. In some countries, the water is foul due to the combination of absolutely no sanitation systems, people using river systems as toilets, to bathe in, to cook in, their garbage dumps, their sewage dumps, everything goes into those open waterways where there's no purification or any kind of water reclamation. As industrial growth and the industrial model moves into the Third World, it's bringing massive pollution.

Also, people are being driven off the land. They are moving into urban slums where there's no water, and they create more of a problem because they are adding to the numbers in the cities that are not treating their sewage. About 90 percent of the sewage in the countries of the global south goes untreated back into waterways, rivers, and oceans. It's a cyclical problem that intensifies as we move from rural sustainable living to urban unsustainable living.

We're creating massive water pollution problems. It's lower in the U.S. and Canada because we've got more money for clean-up and slightly better laws for industry. But water pollution is happening just about everywhere. The only societies where water is still treated sacredly are in ancient tribal societies. Many rural communities in India, China, Africa, and Latin America are still living the way that their ancestors did centuries ago; they aren't creating significant levels of pollution.

**Q: Who's using the bulk of the water here in North America?**

MB: Most of the water is used by industry and agribusiness, which is also an industry. The industrial food production system uses nitrates, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides, which contaminate a lot of water. Intensive livestock operations create horrible pollution. So one of the most important things we can do is to create a more sustainable agricultural system.

**Q: Are there any really tough issues that the movement needs to face that you feel we're not confronting adequately?**

MB: That's the part of my new book that surprised me the most: the technological takeover of our planet's water system. We have been following very closely the big utility companies like Suez and Vivendi, who run water systems on a for-profit basis. And we have been following the bottled water companies, and those have been the kind of two big ones.

And then we have been worried about major movement of water through pipelines, but we have not been keeping our eye on the whole issue of technology to clean up dirty water, whether that's desalination, water purification, nanotechnology purification. It's going to be the "great white hope," and it's all unregulated and very corporate controlled, and it doesn't surprise me that when you look at the United Nations' millennium development goals on water, nobody is talking about cleaning up polluted water. Because, hey, there's gold in those hills. The more our water becomes polluted, the more precious it becomes. The more desperate people are, the more they will pay for their water, and the more money there is to be made from cleaning it up.

The fastest-growing sector of the private water industry is this high technology water clean-up section of this industry, and we must get a better handle on the whole thing. I think that what we are seeing is a cartel of water that is being created like the cartel that has been created for energy. For a long time now, when there was a find of a new field of oil or gas, some large corporation owned it even before it was out of the ground. I see them doing this now with water, and I call them water hunters. These water hunters move in with one goal: to monopolize control over a precious resource in order to make money.

**Q: Are you noticing a greater receptivity to your message about the coming water crisis?**

MB: Most definitely. I was in down in Lubbock, Texas, on a local radio station, and this guy called in and said, "I'm a right-wing, diehard, Republican, red meat, conservative businessman. And I think the little lady's right. Water is different. You can't have anyone monopolize it." It was fascinating; he totally had my argument. We didn't agree on anything else, but we agreed on the importance of retaining public control over this vital resource. So that is hopeful.