
Water: stream of life and knowledge

There is a crucial difference when one refers to water as a living element rather than as a “resource”. The Western point of view makes human beings the centre of everything, a dominant agent of all other living beings. In the same way, capital is (im)posed at the centre of social relations. But water is a living cycle. It moves, transforms, nourishes and is being nourished by other living cycles and provides life. For water, humans are part of other living interconnected cycles. Capital projects instead are imposed. They seek to dominate and be the centre of everything around them; by exploiting, extracting, intoxicating, and killing ... without giving back. This idea of water as a “resource” keeps us far away from conceiving the whole: the living cycles.

“Veiled from our eyes in the day, the spirits can be discerned in the roaring voices of waterfalls, in light shining through foam and seed down, in the drip of water from pools in the crotches of giant forest trees and in the calls of animals and birds. The forest is alive.” – Sanema community, Northern Yanomami, Venezuela, [Bulletin September 2002](#)

“The territory is mother earth, which is made up of everything. Mother earth gave us the river, which is the milk that nourishes us and gives us water to drink, and the forest, which is our roof and our banquet to feast on” - Babau, chief of the Serra do Padeiro community, Brazil, [Bulletin October 2014](#).

Forests support immense webs of life which connect beings and natural cycles in almost imperceptible but crucial ways. The water cycle, the constant movement of water across the planet in liquid and vapour state, hail or snow, intertwines most of these webs of life. Populations living and depending on forests often compare rivers, rain and streams with the veins and arteries that carry blood and move through human bodies. This symbolizes a different view, where water is not a separate or isolated component from other living cycles, but, on the contrary, the water cycle is an essential part of the people, thus, they know, use and protect it with caution, humility and above all with respect.

“For traditional communities, preserving the forest does not only mean to maintain their rights to land and territory but, fundamentally, to protect their civilization, upon which the essence of their culture depends. Communities’ culture involves cross-generation adaptation processes that balance life and the sustainability of natural cycles.” - Zenzi Suhadi, Walhi, Indonesia, [Bulletin November 2014](#)

Other crucial meaning(s) and value(s) transcend(s) body dimension and use needs. These other meanings usually are lived, taught and learnt in traditional communities and are the cultural and spiritual basis for their existence. Over generations, communities share ancient knowledge, memories and identities that are attached to a common body called territory.

“The Elders said that (the Celendín lakes) were sacred, no one was allowed to set foot there, they were the sites for sacred ceremonies and traditional healers came here to collect medicines. The

Elders called this place Conga” - Rondera (peasant patroller) from Cajamarca, Peru, [Bulletin March 2015](#).

“We met around the fire. The canopy of coronilla (Scutia buxifolia), rama negra (Senna corymbosa), guayabo colorado (Myrcianthes cisplatensis) and tala (Celtis spinosa) did what it could to protect us from the fine rain that from time to time was accompanied by the wind. There was a feeling, indecipherable to me, a mixture of spiritual grandeur and earthly safety. We enjoyed the silence full of messages, the nearby crystalline and untiring river, the silenced night elves, also the frogs and crickets leaving time and space to us.” – Nelly Curbelo about the third gathering on women cycles and natural medicine, Uruguay, [Bulletin February 2004](#)

All rainwater and snow goes downhill to form water bodies - such as a river, a lake or a wetland – feeding along their paths many life systems. However, most of the water runs underground. Forests and pastures located in the upper basins and along the banks of rivers and streams improve and nurture groundwater.

“Were it not for the water in the páramo

There would be no life on our planet and in our country.

Some talk of god, but we do not see him:

We see our Pachamama, our nature” – Josefina Lema, Ecuador, [Bulletin March 2015](#)

Furthermore, coastal areas depend on the encounter of freshwater with the sea which produces endless webs of life essential for communities in these areas. Mangroves, for example, are “submerged” forests providing livelihood and culture to coastal towns practicing artisanal and subsistence fishing, as well as shell, snail and crab harvesting.

But above all, the mangrove is territory.

“We consider the mangrove ecosystem to be our mother and this is what we have all learnt. Life is there, the mangrove ecosystem is a maternity and it is a natural industry that God has left us as heritage, so we won’t be poor” - women from the Cayapas Mataje Ecological Reserve, Ecuador, [Bulletin March 2010](#)

“An open fire is your kitchen

Your children, your entertainment

The forest, your medicine

The shade, your protection

A good fish, your food

Chillangua [1], your seasoning

The mangrove, barrier of life

- Part of the poem "Women of the Mangroves", Linver Nazareno, Ecuador, [Bulletin July 2013](#)

(1) An aromatic herb, similar to cilantro

When water is scarce or the usual sources are polluted, it is mainly women and girls who have to travel long distances with heavy loads, causing neck, back and hip injuries, among others. Moreover, their connection to the territory is disrupted and violated.

"We used to dig very small wells to irrigate our crops. Now we must dig deeper and bring water from far away. Drinking water has also become scarce. We have to fetch water for our cattle, chickens and goats, besides domestic use water."- Ms. Ziqubu, Sabokwe, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, affected by eucalyptus plantations community. WRM presentation.

"Aracruz [Plantation Company] closed the river, because it planted eucalyptus trees and the water was gone... then the river dried up. Before it had a strong stream, and now, where it is?"- Francisca, Tupinikim woman, Irajá village, Brazil, affected by eucalyptus plantations, WRM Presentation.

Therefore, women with strong roots within their territories struggle to regain their autonomy and knowledge, often even equating the territory with their own bodies.

"Violence is done to the Earth, our mother, in the same way that violence is done to women. They want to exploit her like they exploit our labour, they do not see or recognise her, they make her invisible in the same way that our contributions and our words are made invisible. It is the same pattern of power that oppresses us, because in the Eurocentric capitalist worldview both women and nature can be appropriated, exploited and controlled," spaces for dialogue among women, Peru, [Bulletin March 2015](#)

...Brave women protectors of their roots

"At the height of the resistance, we would get up at three o'clock in the morning, we would go around the houses to call people out to the march; later we would fetch donated food from market stalls and shops that supported us. Once the marches were under way we set up communal soup kitchens, no one went without food. Some of us would walk in the front line, singing our marching songs and facing down the repression. We did not mind the weariness, the blows, the frequent railing of our husbands or the incomprehension of our family. We were fighting for water, which is life; for our children, and our children's children," – woman guardian of the lagoons in Cajamarca, Peru, [Bulletin March 2015](#)