

Concept Note

Developing a Water Ethics Charter

20 October 2013

A "Water Ethics Charter" is being developed by a growing group of partner organizations, who will formally launch the Charter at the 2015 World Water Forum in Daegu, South Korea. The Charter will articulate a succinct set of ethical principles to guide water use and management. Businesses, cities, and other organizations who endorse the Water Ethics Charter would commit to uphold those principles. The aim is to shift the discourse of water policy beyond a focus on meeting minimum standards to a shared ethic of actively promoting environmental restoration and human wellbeing.

Why a Water Ethics Charter?

Our premise is that conventional approaches to setting water policies and practices are leading us along an unsustainable path, in spite of the best intentions. Decision-making based on economic advantage, legal requirements, or political expediency are not serving our long-term best interest. In order to break out of the cycle of short-term interests taking precedence over long-term water sustainability, ethical principles need to be explicitly incorporated into the decision-making process. The Water Ethics Charter will offer a succinct set of principles developed by a diverse set of stakeholders from business, government, NGOs, Indigenous Peoples groups and others.

Who Is Involved in developing the Charter?

The idea for a Charter grew out of the 6th World Water Forum in Marseille in March 2012, and has recently been picked up by the Water-Culture Institute (USA),¹ the French Water Academy (Académie de l'eau)² and UNESCO's International Hydrological Programme³ who jointly serve as the Secretariat for the Initiative. Since our kick-off meeting in Paris in April 2013 we have been joined by other partners, including the Botin Foundation Water Observatory (Madrid), the Académie d'éthique (Paris), The Club of Rome (Zurich), and the Alliance for Water Stewardship (Global). We welcome new partners to join the initiative and expand our geographic and sectoral representation.

What Issues will the Charter address?

The Charter will articulate a common set of principles about how water and water ecosystems should be utilized and protected for the benefit of present and future generations of people, other life forms, and the planet itself. While the details will be developed by the partner organizations in time for the April 2015 World Water Forum, the following issues are among those likely to be addressed:

- rights of water ecosystems to function in a healthy state;
- rights of people to healthy water ecosystems;

¹ www.waterculture.org

² www.academie-eau.org

³ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/water/ihp/>

- economic principles of reasonable use of water;
- rights of Indigenous and traditional cultures to customary water ecosystems;
- principles of transparency and participation in water governance.

What will the Charter look like?

At this point we anticipate that the Charter will be a very short document of about two pages, supplemented by a more detailed guidance document. One deliberate unknown at this stage is whether the Charter will be a fixed statement which would be either endorsed or not endorsed, or whether the Charter would be a flexible document which could be customized by each signatory.

Who will sign the Charter?

The Charter will be applicable at any scale where there is a governance body with decision-making authority. A household or even an individual could endorse the Charter, as well as an NGO, a city, a public agency, a river basin organization, a farm, business associations, corporations, an Institute, etc. For practical and strategic reasons, our initial focus will be on corporations, cities, and river basin organizations.

The added value of a Water Ethics Charter

The Charter will introduce ethics into operational and policy decisions about water. Whether the Charter is fixed or flexible, the ethical principles will be explicit and transparent and will serve to raise awareness about the ethical choices inherent in water management. In particular, the Charter will force issues of rights-of-nature, inter-generational justice, and cultural rights into public view where they can be constructively discussed and debated.

Developing the Charter

A 12-member Steering Committee is being organized which will be broadly representative of key constituencies. A support group of technical *advisors* as well as financial *sponsors* are being recruited simultaneously. The Steering Committee will oversee the drafting of the charter document and the long process of marketing and outreach to solicit endorsements. The Committee's first official meeting will be held at UNESCO-Paris on 3-4 March 2014. Contingent on funding, and at the discretion of the Steering Committee, a series of studies may be commissioned to support the development of the Charter document, and to serve as the basis for a comprehensive compendium of operational guidelines. Following the March meeting at UNESCO, at least one and possibly two additional meetings of the Steering Committee are anticipated prior to the April 2015 World Water Forum.

How to get involved:

If you would like to become part of this initiative, or for more information, please contact one of the Secretariat members listed below. Thank you for your interest!

- Mr. David Groenfeldt (Director, Water-Culture Institute) - dgroenfeldt@waterculture.org
- Mr. Jean-Louis Oliver (Secretary-General, Académie de l'Eau) - academie@oieau.fr
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