

An Ethical Code for Water

In a polarizing world where half of us have too much water and the other half have too little, all of us share the need for water to satisfy basic human needs, support agriculture, and green our cities. Recognizing the essential role of water in all life, numerous cities and organizations have identified strategies for provision of drinking water, water conservation and distribution in pursuit of a sustainable future.

Water has been recognized as a universal human right in global efforts such as the U.N. [Millennium Development Goals](#), which state that:

“The **right to water** entitles everyone to have access to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic use”.

Further, many recognize that nature has an intrinsic right to the integrity of all her components, including water. We posit that all who participate in the community of life on Earth, including humans and nature, have an equal and universal basic right to participate in the water cycle.

This implies certain ethical obligations for water users, suppliers, and institutions, which have not yet been directly articulated or accepted.

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### Background

The code below was first conceived at a workshop at The Nature of Cities Summit in Paris in June 2019 and was [published](#), after extensive editing and revision, in November of 2020. The initial organizers have been joined by a series of co-authors and dozens of reviewers in 2020, 2021 and 2022, who have helped us clarify and refine this ethical code for water.

This current code is our latest effort to establish an ethical basis for water use and management. This document is a draft of our understandings, hopefully a basis for many conversations and policy discussions as more and more stakeholders address the principles laid out. The document also represents a simple guide for ethical actions with regard to water.

It is our hope that this can become a useful basis for diverse parties and institutions in their efforts to address the challenges of water in our current climate crisis, in which no area is unaffected by changing water patterns.

## Declaration

### *It is universally accepted that:*

1. Water is the basis for all life on earth.
2. All people and ecosystems have a basic right to clean, safe water.
3. Ecosystem functions provide a wide range of vital water-related services.
4. More than half of the world's freshwater supply is currently allocated for human activities.
5. Nearly one third of freshwater species face extinction.
6. Neither people nor nature are universally receiving their rights to water.
7. Communities can experience water excess and water scarcity.
8. Climate crisis is changing hydrosocial cycles in fundamental ways.
9. Most urban areas import water, with potential impacts on upstream and downstream ecosystems.
10. All urban activities have an embodied water footprint, unrecognized by most consumers.
11. The sourcing, treatment and distribution of water have energy and material implications, with broad environmental impacts.
12. There exist many ecological, social and technical solutions to improve water access, quality, and management.
13. The commodification of water and the need to reduce consumption often result in conflicting interests.
14. When the public is included in decision-making about water management, there is less risk of exclusion from water access.
15. There is a need to address the mismatch between administrative boundaries to better manage water resources and watershed areas.
16. People are entitled to use water to meet their needs, and to give expression to their culture and values, but must do so responsibly.

17. People are responsible to protect and restore the integrity and functioning of water systems.
18. These obligations and responsibilities will only be fulfilled through the commitment and participation of national and sub-national governments, civil society, academia, the private sector, communities, conveyors, and individuals.

### **Commitment**

#### ***I as a water user will commit to:***

1. Learning where my water comes from.
2. Understanding that natural fresh water is a shared, common resource that is finite in global supply.
3. Recognizing the ethical imperative to conserve water and to use and share it mindfully.
4. Being cognizant and responsible for upstream and downstream impacts of my actions.
5. Reserving potable water for drinking, hygiene, and food production.
6. Reusing water.
7. Preventing pollutants from entering the water cycle.

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We, as water suppliers, managers, or conveyors, commit to all of the above, and also to:

1. Taking a holistic, socio-ecological perspective on sustainable management of watersheds and aquifers.
2. Engaging ourselves, peers, decision makers, and communities in producing knowledge and awareness about how our water system works and our roles in it.
3. Investing in consistent data collection, analysis and sharing.
4. Investing in water reuse to reclaim, cycle and distribute, greywater and blackwater.
5. Preventing pollutants and untreated wastewater from entering socio-ecosystems.
6. Pricing water services effectively to incentivize stewardship.

7. Operating in good faith when engaging with local communities.
8. Participating in multi-stakeholder water governance processes.
9. Contributing and adhering to water action plans and other policy instruments.

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***We, as government, business and civil society at all levels, commit to all of the above, and also to:***

1. Enabling governance that ensures water stewardship and regeneration.
2. Ensuring that everyone has access to clean water for drinking and bathing.
3. Ensuring that water is available to support basic human needs (food preparation, food production, etc.).
4. Ensuring that water management is equitable, not monopolized, nor driven primarily by economic gain.
5. Preparing for climate crises by developing and adopting equitable resilience strategies.
6. Mandating swift action in the face of impending water crises.
7. Ensuring collection and open dissemination of information, data, and best practices for water management and stewardship.
8. Facilitating and investing in creativity, innovation and experimentation to develop regenerative practices, infrastructures and technologies.
9. Developing and enforcing suitable water policies and action plans for every city through multi-stakeholder engagement.
10. Managing conflicts in water provision.
11. Ensuring that diverse socio-cultural values, needs and practices regarding water are included, acknowledged, and accommodated.

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