

Blue Salon conference report: Oceans dying; Fresh water supply to plummet

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Vulnerability to peak oil not yet appreciated

The Blue Salon conference on water was held June 16-17 in Washington, D.C., at the Swedish Embassy. Ambassador Gunnar Lund and the local Green Salon group convened a wide-ranging program where the conferees could overlook the Potomac. The first day was devoted to fresh water, and the second day devoted to oceans. I was a lucky invitee and learned much. The information was scary and sometimes exciting, and the active participants were a gift to all. But it took me a week to figure out exactly what I learned conceptually about the big picture. After much digestion, here's my report.

The related situations for fresh and salt water can be approached separately, as they usually are, but there is more in common between them than just being in dire shape with no remedy in sight. The common denominator for the whole world's water crisis was not identified at this conference, although half the people there might have agreed privately that the problem is the plague of modern humans and their filth and selfishness.

Given the diverse backgrounds and loyalties of the participants, and the backdrop of the town's politics and powerful interests, it is to be expected that no unified approach or solution would be immediately forthcoming. It's too much for one guy from San Francisco to come there and do this, and my very brief contribution was to bring up the role of energy (petroleum) for fresh water, and plastic in the oceans.

It's as if the water crisis is not serious enough yet for humanity to deal with it. We can't even quit the clear damage we heap on the oceans and our disastrous waste of fresh water, despite all the information and warnings anyone could ever need. Rather than following mistaken policies on resources, we are witnessing and are part of a war on the biotic community. It's difficult to strongly address the catastrophe when the financial incentive for both the corporations and the average working people's survival does not relent.

Water experts say that over 1.2 billion people lack safe water supplies. Climate specialists anticipate that due to global warming and sea-level rise, one billion additional people will be without adequate, clean water in a few decades. This totals over two billion, but the future is murky, and the figure could be low because all the scientific consensus-warnings on climate change have been too conservative. Additionally, changes in world climate have happened much sooner than expected.

Fresh water withdrawal rates even exceed population growth. When certain trend lines cross, something on the chart takes a dive.

Perhaps the overarching problem can be termed the global culture of extraction and expansion. Ironically, a favored solution by some corporate and technocratic elements at Blue Salon qualifies as the most cohesive approach, although many activists would cry out in objection to this. But overcoming the profit-maximizing/technofix approaches along with the whole extractive culture seems to lack adherents among passive consumers and even victims of water privatization and dams.

The Blue Salon welcoming statement included questions that Culture Change readers can relate to: "What does 'growth' really mean? What is 'progress'? How do we assign value to life and the precious resources that keep us alive?"

One sometimes doesn't know if good words are heartfelt or just used as buzzwords. After getting to know these Washington-based activists and thinkers at Green Salon, I'm sure they are not just careerists. One organizer with Green Salon told me, "the point of the Blue Salon is to acknowledge the problems and create a dialog towards solutions." Another said "We strive to provide the hope necessary to garner the courage to face the horror." Yet another challenged me to come up with what did motivate me "by the Salon despite the cynicism?" He offered that "the Salon is about connections between people, being touched, and showing that we are capable of high quality intelligence. We are making a circle around nature, learning about things we never would have." I have to embrace this as well.

Because the water crisis is astoundingly daunting and negative, as it pervades the lifestyles of intransigent, rich countries, it swamps our ability to solve it over an appropriate and necessary time period -- including of course one weekend. The conference's success did not include a clear plan of attack to scale us way back to "primitive," sustainable levels of use. One must first quantify the problem and explore options. Then, after enough time on that necessary approach, as the crisis still mounts and leaders don't lead, the stark truth starts to overtake everyone paying attention:

the overuse of fresh water and shrinking supplies due to glacier melt require us all to shut off the valves of wasting water, just as we must pull the plug on generating greenhouse gases. For our oceans' health, our blue salon did not come up with a clear way to give our imperiled seas immediate relief from fossil-fueled warming, over-fishing and unaddressed plastic debris (more on this later in this report). But if anyone can, the Green Salon and their Swedish Embassy colleagues can envision a hard-hitting Blue Salon II to do so.

The issues of energy for maintaining pumps for water was partially addressed, yet it was left to a solar power manufacturer to make an unrealistic claim instead of acknowledging, with his fellow speakers on the first panel, that peak oil presents an unprecedented challenge. Thus unanswered was my question:

"Given the world's peaking oil extraction occurring about now, and the possibility of petrocollapse, what would be the probable levels of pumping of water that can be done without petroleum, and how much energy would be needed to pump critical supplies of water?"

I was asked to clarify, indicating perhaps that imminent, major energy shortage is not anticipated or feared just yet. Phrased again, my question was: without cheap petroleum in abundance, what will be the future of water availability? This question needs an answer soon, so that the anticipated deficit of energy for the water deficit can be grappled with in advance of the full crisis when it hits. It will probably come without clear warning, although many of us will not be surprised. Among today's ignored warnings for cities is adequate fire-fighting water in the event of an earthquake, for example, when water might be extra scarce due to post-peak oil energy supply failure. The stupidity of U.S. energy policy as it starts maximizing biofuels is compounded by these crops' extra demands on water that will run out.

Fresh water problems are many and interrelated, having to do with consumption of beef, for example. Such agriculture uses many times the amount of water and energy than grain crops require. Yet before we assume that we can play a numbers game by cutting way back on agriculture's 70% of irrigated water-use in the U.S., for example, we must remember even grain farming is unsustainable on a large scale when water is short and the increasingly salinized soils spoil good yields -- just as they did in Sumeria, the cradle of irrigated Western Civilization now strewn with depleted uranium.

Another issue brought forward at Blue Salon is that of virtual or invisible water as a component of products traded globally, whereby certain agricultural items may reflect vastly different amounts of water used in production. (The same is true with energy content, from petroleum usually, that is embedded in products, packaging and transport, including renewable-energy system-products imagined to be free of the petroleum infrastructure.) A mind-blowing comparison of food items' virtual water component: one potato has 25 liters. One hamburger has 2,400 liters.

There is actually no shortage of fresh water when we consider that what we really have is a longage of people with their modern habits. We used to be able to say this of the fisheries too, but many have become so degraded along with the health of the oceans, it is a worse situation than mere longage of people. Things are so severe that if the human population voluntarily cut its numbers down drastically in a couple of generations, much damage and unraveling is already out of control. Whether from overfishing or climate change, certain parts of our watery world have their whole ecosystems in full retreat, scientists have found -- and the plastic plague is not yet factored in or understood, except that it will go on for centuries even if we stopped making plastics now.

Overpopulation was the elephant in the room because no speaker's presentation included the issue. But, when it was raised by an audience member, and when another member wondered what it is we are supposed to eat if we can't eat meat or fish, a voice in the hall suggested "Each other!" Not one speaker advocated human population stabilization or reduction -- even though 2.4 billion people lack access to good sanitation today. A small fraction of the excess wealth in the world, for example from the arms trade, could easily solve such a tragedy of poor sanitation (and lack of basic education, etc.), but it's probably insane to believe good policies are ready to be adopted if only the rich and the greedy will check out and heed the latest nonprofit NGO report. This is why it's essential to gain understanding of the hard-wired (and haywire) extractor culture that dominates the world.

Another major subject that was not part of the conference, due to time constraints, was specific advocacy for the group to stop water waste in the most egregious practices. However, it takes very progressive thinking to question some aspects of the car-dependent American Dream. One day when the fresh water crisis has finally hit home, former car owners won't dare admit they washed their cars and wasted good water. Typically, at least 100 gallons are used each time if the job is done in one's driveway or on the street. About half as much water can be used at a commercial car wash. But given the other costs of car washing, i.e., poison runoff of road grime and detergent going into the environment, and the energy required to pump the water to the household or business, there is no justification for ever washing a car -- it doesn't affect how it runs whatsoever. The crises of water, climate and energy are not being taken seriously until washing cars and then the personal possession of a car are outlawed (most likely on the local, spontaneous level).

Golf courses are a vast, notorious waste of water and pollution. However, as with the car habit, people will continue to

extract the water for the golf industry and maintain that lifestyle as long as they can get away with it. No conservation movement is shutting it down, and by the time people target the nearest wasteful golf course, the industrial economy will be failing due to petrocollapse. The massive waste of water for golf courses (and other wastes such as cattle ranching) is used as a reason to suggest that a high population of people is not the problem; "it's just what some selfish people do." That reasoning assumes people under the dominant culture can do the right thing to reform, whereas the culture is bent on destruction and self-destruction as long as big bucks can be made.

Privatization of water and the political struggles against it, along with its questionable record, was addressed, primarily by Maj Fiil of Food and Water Watch. She's not radical, and therefore it struck me in private conversation that her approach can be blind-sided by the dominant culture. But her honesty and passion gave a grassroots dimension to the conference. Little new was presented during the whole conference in terms of new privatization schemes or new ways to combat privatization, but we learned about the poor record of privatization that the world lenders don't seem to recognize.

The world water market is estimated at \$400 billion already, according to Goldman Sachs. No wonder Nestle, for example, plans 40 plastic-water bottling factories in the U.S. where pristine watersheds are inhabited by folks who generally want some more employment and tax revenue. When contracts are signed for water rights, this can be hard to change because the World Trade Organization can step in on behalf of the corporation.

The Blue Salon's inability to make strides to strike down water privatization and the dangerous trend of bottling water was partly because of the presence of industrial interests at the Blue Salon. One speaker with the Water Advocates was alleged to have Coca-Cola corporate representatives on or linked to his nonprofit's board of directors. It's not only that Coca-Cola sells millions of plastic water bottles that ought not to go into the environment, especially when tap water can easily be of higher standards than bottled water. Across India, for example, severe water shortages have been experienced by communities that live around Coca-Cola's bottling plants. Thanks to the India Resource Center, Coca-Cola was banned from the Make Poverty History March on July 2, 2005, a march of close to 300,000 people in Edinburgh in Scotland.

Tens of millions of people within India have been displaced from their homes, villages and farms by the various hydroelectric projects dating from India's independence. This is part of the worsening potable-water crisis, the biggest problem for rural peoples worldwide. As part of the "development" process, trees are removed from the land and whole ecosystems. So everyone's survival is thus threatened, and the multiplier of climate change adds to the general global catastrophe.

A World Bank environmental director at Blue Salon, dealing with coral reefs, was energetically positive as she touted the Bank's activities until she was harshly dealt with by a panel member who tracks the World Bank. The Mangrove Action Project's Alfredo Quarto informed me that the Bank claims it has stopped shrimp-farming practices that degrade the environment, but that it is simply not true. Unfortunately, the Bank can keep doing its top-down thing with a major budget, unlike the grassroots activists. These corporate types did not squelch discussion at Blue Salon. The conference seemed designed to attract them and make them feel included rather than vilified.

The technological, capitalist sentiments and proposals on the table nearly comprised a philosophical approach for perhaps half the attendees. The trouble was, few of these efforts dealt with the global scale required in an energy-poorer world, with the readiness needed to implement soon, with justice for the people affected, and the usual problems of mechanical feasibility, bureaucratic competence, and political acceptance. Some conference participants appeared as mainly business promoters without much substantial progress to point to. An exception was Erik Hagberg, of Pacific Aquaculture Cooperatives International, a lead partner of the UN SIDS Partnership for implementation of New Sustainable Technologies. In PAC's equitable financial model developing nations become stake holders.

Many corporate-linked participants, along with several well established nonprofit organizations on hand, shared a top-down approach to dealing with parts of the water crisis, while applauding the idea of grass roots action. Yet, Roshanak Ameli-Terhani, a Green Salon moderator with the Avand Institute, felt compelled to address this sector's top-down, technological and capitalistic global presence and massive power by correcting the assertions and assumptions that say bottom-up approaches are only workable with top-down participation. I led the applause for her.

Here is how water, climate change and politics/war/genocide can interact: U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon recounted recently that twenty years ago the rains in Sudan began to fail. Some, including scientists, hoped it was a quirk of nature. But it coincided with temperatures rising in the Indian Ocean, disrupting monsoons.

The drying of sub-Saharan Africa derives, therefore in part, from human-caused global warming, he says, and he adds

that it's not just a coincidence that violence in Darfur commenced during extreme drought. Until then, Arab nomads with their herds lived alongside farmers:

"...black

farmers would welcome herders as they crisscrossed the land, grazing their camels and sharing wells. But once the rains stopped, farmers fenced their land (so) there was no longer enough food and water for all. Fighting broke out (and) evolved into the full-fledged tragedy we witness today."

- Washington Post, June 16, 2007

Could Ban Ki Moon add that population growth was a factor in the strife, and that farmers may have been forced to grow cash crops for export? I have not researched the situation.

Should affluent westerners believe they are impervious to water shortage as a nemesis, consider the southwest U.S.: climate-change induced drought; depleting aquifers; diverted and degraded rivers (the Colorado does not even reach the Gulf of California), and risk of levee failure at the Sacramento River delta that can affect millions of people and acres of farmland to the south. Emblematic of the Southwest's vulnerability to water mismanagement and peak-oil impact on water pumping is Las Vegas. The town's weekly CityLife newspaper will soon feature an article on these topics with input from Culture Change.

Oceans, coral, mangroves

The presentations on the state of the oceans were disturbing and alarming, as expected. A one-two punch on coral reefs and mangrove forests was worth the price of admission all by itself. The price was free for all of us, thanks to the generosity of the Swedes and the Green Salon, but you know what I mean.

Tom Goreau with the Global Coral Reef Alliance, and Alfredo Quarto, of the Mangrove Action Project, both gave well informed and moving presentations on their areas of study and activism. Goreau made it clear that the IPCC assumptions and data gathering techniques downplay the total pressures on the atmosphere and oceans from greenhouse gases and their feedback loops. His was a climate-change rundown that could make anyone say, Uh Oh. The monumental death rate for the world's corals is so far underway, it's as if we went to sleep one day with a natural world around us, only to wake up like Rumple Stiltskin to find the planet has been ravaged to an unimaginable extent.

Goreau also presented on a later panel his project that revives the oceans via "Biorock mineral accretion." He amazed all present with pictures of growing coral reefs that are started and maintained with the placement of simple rebar structures kept charged with a small amount of electric current. Calcium deposits make "biorock" on the metal, and corals, once planted (although animals are not planted any more than plants are animated), grow faster than wild corals ever do -- despite the warming, polluted sea. These new reefs protect beaches even to the extent of holding off the erosive effect of sea-level rise. The coral reefs and better sand deposits lure tourists, but the hotel business is not yet visionary enough to see the whole picture. Unfortunately, the current is always necessary, and eventually the sand build-up destroys the reef. But the sea life gets a real lift for several years. Goreau is a true activist, fighting government agencies to protect the last natural reefs in the U.S., with next to no budget for his campaigns.

Mangroves are disappearing fast too, mainly because of shrimp farming. This lucrative, subsidized activity deprives the wild fisheries of breeding grounds and also removes the shoreline's line of defense against storms and tsunamis that a mangrove forest provides. Shrimp farming is almost as shortsighted as beef-ranch or crop farming in a rainforest: soon after the first yields, the production goes way down. In the case of shrimp, they get diseased, die-off massively, and the farms are soon abandoned -- and never restored ecologically.

EarthEcho International was co-founded by Jacques Cousteau's granddaughter Alexandra Cousteau. She moderated the ocean-protection panel of the second morning of Blue Salon. Her own presentation was on a specific fisheries crisis that touches on diet, culture and trade: she told the conferees much about sharks. All the large ones are drastically dwindled in numbers, and the effects of this on the whole food chain will not be known until it is too late. (Similarly, the acidification of the oceans from excess carbon dioxide uptake, causing some organisms to dissolve, is part of our new age's theme of "entering the unknown" which pervades the planet's ecological crisis.) Cousteau's slides of the changing business of shark-fin harvesting was so moving that one could almost wish for a large dorsal fin to approach next time one takes a swim. The point is that the large fins are no longer available; fins harvested the size of coins are now de rigueur, sadly.

Ms. Cousteau, with her fervent idealism, hard work, good track-record, stunning looks as a tall blond, and her famous name, could be a cinch to become the kind of major celebrity the world is waiting for. She could do far more good for our world than, of course, than the usual Hollywood types and politicos being fawned over by the mass media, but also she could accomplish more than the unsung garden-variety activist or scientist trying to save the planet.

Naomi Rose, with Humane Society International, gave a solid overview of the plight of marine mammals. Erik Hagberg, CEO of a cooperative called PAC International, shared his vision of sea cucumber harvesting by locals. The keynote address for the whole conference was by Anders Berntell, executive director of Stockholm International Water Institute which has a mastery of the global water situation that includes acknowledgment of peak oil. An impressive speaker on fresh water was Mark Shannon who heads up national teams and databases out of the University of Illinois. It would be a shame if Dr. Shannon's dedication, management skill and knowledge is too much in service of the status quo system of government and corporate prerogatives.

I was surprised that the plastic plague was not much of a factor in the Oceans discussions. This slight was easily because other crises at hand are huge and demanding. Nets (of plastic) were mentioned as still able to kill after they drift on and on after being lost at sea. After the panel on the importance of salt water sources was through, and the audience participation segment started, my question was

"Petroleum and plastics have not been mentioned, although I just did. I have with me materials from the Algalita Marine Research Foundation, including the award-winning documentary Our Synthetic Sea, that I can provide anyone." [Ambassador Lund was one who graciously accepted the DVD after I told him of the preponderance of plastic debris compared to zooplankton, and how toxins are biomagnified up the food chain thanks to plastics.] "The question part of my question is, given the panel's dire assessment of the impacts of economic activity on climate and the oceans, with the only example of let-up having been the collapse of the Soviet Union, do you advocate alternative economic systems or advocate economic collapse?" (laughter)

The only answer I got was that the Humane Society speaker felt she addressed plastics by mentioning the nets.

Concerning energy inherent in ocean tides, two companies, Natural Currents and Verdant, presented conceptual and r&d programs to generate electricity at the ocean's edge, which feasibly could also be used for desalination of sea water. These appear to have potential for certain applications more favorable than wind and solar energy system solutions. My reaction to the presentations was not "Great, we've found the answer!" because, in general, the technofix approach is hopeless for broad application anywhere along the lines of today's economic system. We are in an overpopulated world that will see demand-destruction through industrial collapse. Culture Change does support localized, specific, decentralized approaches to obtaining energy for minimum purposes -- but not for running cars and electric appliances and gadgets in houses for individualistic, isolated consumption, especially for a huge population.

For the whole conference, the networking among the kind participants and the fine food was extremely worthwhile -- just the potential for participation in the Sail Transport Network, the fledgling Culture Change project, among people able to immediately feel the allure on the azure pure sea lanes of sustainability, was worth my traveling to this conference.

I took the train from the San Francisco Bay, where sail transport is awaiting to be reborn, and back there, I mean here, to find out how to pronounce my name from the Swedish Ambassador's lips. Mission accomplished, and you may call me Yawn as Jan is supposed to be pronounced in Sweden.

On the train I ran out of my own filtered water supply in glass and steel containers, as always happens when the all important organic food supply weighs enough already. Amtrak water, however, is not as bad as Amtrash's plastic-encased food, I discovered, because if one drinks from the bathroom faucets then the questionable taste of the paper water-cups is avoided along with the dioxin residue from paper-bleaching. Before knowing this, I received from a new activist-friend some of his New Zealand water from a polycarbonate container from which he had been swigging. I did this even though I figured there was bisphenol-A in the plastic to possibly disrupt my endocrine system.

A suitable beverage substitute on Amtrak is beer, but it costs five bucks a pop. This is not a new idea to substitute water with alcoholic drinks: Johnny Appleseed was useful for spreading apple orchards for white settlers who needed the cider as an alternative to any doubtful water supplies. Shipping beer or any other beverage around the world is inappropriate in our greenhoused world, so I suggest powdering the formula much as cola drinks are reconstituted locally, shipping it with sail ships or mules. If such an abominable drink would not revive local brewing and wine making from any available fruits, then I'll guzzle a coke out of a plastic bottle in 2012 if I'm proven wrong.

Resource links

Global Coral Reef Alliance:

globalcoral.org

Mangrove Action Project:

mangroveactionproject.org

SIWI, Stockholm International Water Institute:

siwi.org - see Stockholm conference on water, August 2007

EarthEcho International (Alexandra Cousteau, team leader):

earthecho.org

Food and Water Watch:

foodandwaterwatch.org

and their new report "Take Back the Tap: Why Choosing Tap Water over Bottled Water is Better for Your Health, Your Pocketbook, and the Environment":

fwwatch.org

Algalita Marine Research Foundation (for Our Synthetic Sea DVD):

algalita.com

Culture Change Letter #44, November 25, 2003, "Overpopulation's toll: Water privatization and the rising conflict":

culturechange.org/e-letter-water.html

India Resource Center:

us.oneworld.net

A Climate Culprit In Darfur, Washington Post, by Ban Ki Moon
June 16, 2007:

washingtonpost.com/

San Francisco says no to bottled water - CNN, June 24, 2007:

cnn.com

BizBash "events" report on Blue Salon:

bizbash.com

PAC International & PAC RMI Inc. (first page leads to the UN SIDS Partnership sites):

pacinternatioal.org

WorldWater & Solar Technologies Corp.:

worldwater.com

Water Advocates, in Washington DC:

wateradvocates.org

Water filtration that's safe, non-plastic and inexpensive:

grist.org

Sail Transport Network:

sailtransportnetwork.org