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Taking on the water barons

Trisha Sertori, Contributor, Gianyar | Tue, 04/07/2009 2:29 PM | Environment

Indonesia's ancient water conservation system may hold one of the keys for water protection in a world facing an arid future, according to US-based film producer Steven Starr.

Starr, who produced *Flow: For Love of Water*, an award-winning documentary by director Irena Salina that examines the \$US400 billion global industry controlling much of the world's clean water, visited members of the Kintamani region's subak, or water managers, last week. Starr was in Bali to present *Flow* as the first event in the 2009 Balinale Festival; the festival proper runs from Oct. 20 to 25.

"I was privileged to meet with 16 heads of subak in the Kintamani area," Starr says. "They discussed the historic irrigation systems here - very ancient and very impressive. From a nonscientific viewpoint you would have to classify the subak as the masters of water."

However, as the global population grows and pollution of the world's rivers and seas increases, such indigenous practices could be under threat from the growing water trade that is turning this essential resource into a commodity.

"There are so many forces at work - market forces and large corporations that see water as they do oil," Starr says. "When control of water distribution is in corporate hands it becomes a case of who can pay. Around the world corporations are making it harder for people at the lower end of the economy to gain access to potable water at a price they can afford."

This is the issue that *Flow* boldly and uncompromisingly examines. In making the film, Salina traveled the world talking to an impressive list of experts. Her film sets out the global problem of how all the world's major water resources are gradually being taken over by major corporations, with the support of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

"The film explores the various forces that conspire or conjoin to create circumstances where potable water is not available at the lower end of the economy. Where people are forced to go to polluted rivers in search of water," Starr says.

He lays some of the blame at the foot of the World Bank, which he accuses of being "complicit" in partnering with large water corporations on projects such as dams that displace people and alter river courses, as part of the bank's historical tendency to support massive projects over local, grassroots projects, such as water protection and conservation.

"People are displaced to create the dams that serve industry, dams such as The Three Gorges dam in China. What you have is a circumstance where, as Peter Gleick of the Pacific Institute says, "the World Bank knows how to spend a billion US dollars in one place, but not how to spend \$1,000 in a million places'."

He cites the subak system, a 1,000-year-old Balinese practice that gives all farmers equal access to the water needed for rice cultivation, as an example of how grassroots systems can be well in advance of modern technology and deserving of support to ensure their maintenance.

"The wisdom I saw in the subak was brilliant. You would need a massive team of scientists to achieve what they have been doing forever. I hope their knowledge is recognized by science," Starr says.

"I feel we do need to return to many of these old ways that have worked for centuries."

Yet the deepening global water crisis, with increasing water pollution and acid rain, may damage this ancient practice. Farmers could end up being forced to buy noncontaminated water for their fields.

Of all the environment-related issues that will affect the future -the disappearing ozone layer, pollution such as the mass of plastic waste "twice the size of Texas" rafting across the Pacific, global warming and a growing world population - it is access to potable water that will be the major issue confronting humans in the very near future, Starr says.

"Water is the biggie. It has just come out of the realm of policy and into the public eye. Currently around 1.2 billion people around the globe do not have access to clean, potable water."

This lack of access is the main driver behind burgeoning health costs, he says.

"The World Health Organization tells us 90 percent of diseases are water borne; clean water reduces disease levels. To bring clean water to the 1.2 billion people at risk of contaminated water would cost in excess of 30 billion US annually, but when that is compared to the cost of deaths, illness and lost productivity from water-borne diseases, it is minimal."

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Starr, who firmly believes the future lies in the hands of today's youth, also visited students from Bali's Green School, teaching them about the importance of water and its conservation.

Green School students have been working on water projects for the past three months, guided long-distance by Starr. Several of the school's students presented their findings at EACOS in Bangkok recently.

"The school did a water-based project on water quality in local rivers. I worked with them from the US and while here I taught the kids about water," says Starr.

Access to clean water, he maintains, is not a privilege but a universal right. Starr has joined millions of other water activists calling for the inclusion of the right to water in the United Nation's 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights; they have put together a petition for this purpose.

The declaration currently contains 30 articles; the call for the inclusion of the right to water is known as Article 31, the aim of which is to guarantee access to potable water for all, rather than allowing its privatization in the hands of a few.

Ordinary people, such as the Green School students, can make a difference to the world's water resources and use, says Starr, urging people to sign the Article 31 petition.

Privatization, along with drought and pollution, is one of the three main issues limiting access to water, Starr points out.

"All three are the threat. If you scratch the surface of conflict around the world you will soon see access to water is at the root of them all - and will get worse."

"The facts are simple - the world has always had less than 1 percent of drinkable water available. That volume does not change. But we are in an explosive "population" growth cycle with a diminishing water quality cycle. This is like an unstoppable force hitting an immovable object - disastrous."

Compounding the situation is the fact that "money and market forces have a history of destroying and subverting ancient practices, such as the subak. Indonesia deserves massive respect for their wisdom in managing water and may they hold on to this forever."

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