

# NATURE HOLDS KEY TO OUR WATER PROBLEMS

**World Water Day, designated by the United Nations and first observed in 1993, is now marked each year on March 22. Its purpose is to focus attention on the importance of water. This year's theme is 'Nature for Water', exploring nature-based solutions to the water challenges we face in the 21st century.**

Damaged ecosystems affect the quantity and quality of water available for human consumption. Today, 21 billion people live without pure drinking water at home, affecting their health, education and livelihoods.

Sustainable Development Goal 6 commits the world to ensuring that everyone has access to safe water by 2030, and includes targets on protecting the natural environment and reducing pollution.

The importance of water features in Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, where he insists that "access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right... essential to human survival, ... and is a condition for the exercise of other human rights." (LS, chap 2, par 30)

Talking to a group of international experts last year, Pope Francis described water as "decisive for the future of humanity." He said he asks himself "if we are not moving towards a great world war over water." Citing statistics from the UN, he noted that each day, a thousand children die from water-related illnesses and that millions consume polluted water.

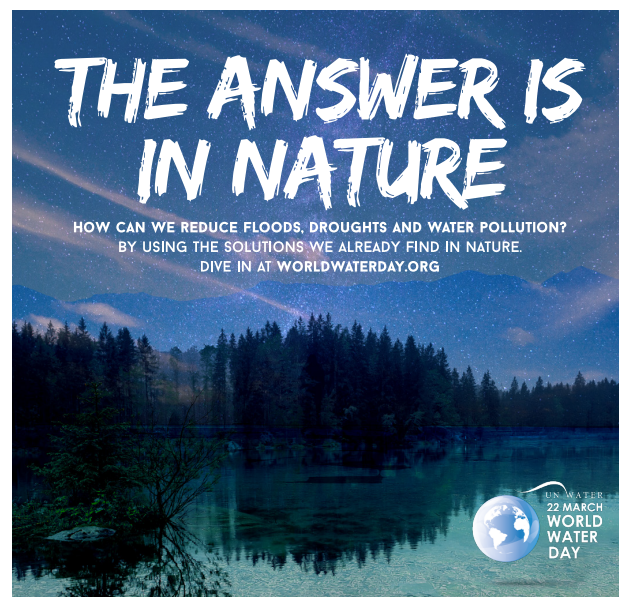
The lack of clean and safe drinking water is a source of great suffering, the pope said. "It also cries out for practical solutions capable of surmounting the selfish concerns that prevent everyone from exercising this fundamental right."

Organisers of this year's World Water Day say that the answers to our problems with floods, droughts and water pollution lie in using the solutions we already find in nature.

Environmental damage, together with climate change, is driving the water-related crises we see around the world. Floods, droughts and water pollution are all made worse by degraded vegetation, soil, rivers and lakes. When we neglect our ecosystems, we make it harder to provide everyone with the water we need to survive and thrive.

Nature-based solutions have the potential to solve many of our water challenges. We need to do so much more with green infrastructure, and to harmonise it with grey wastewater

systems wherever possible. Planting new forests, reconnecting rivers to flood-plains and restoring wetlands will rebalance the water cycle and improve human health and livelihoods.



Many New Zealanders have grown up thinking that their waterways are among the best and cleanest in the world. But a growing amount of evidence suggests that this view is mistaken. In a dramatic two-part documentary, *New Zealand: Polluted Paradise*, Aljazeera journalist Naashon Zalk investigates the claim that the country's waterways are now amongst the most contaminated in the developed world.

In reality, he says, the purity of New Zealand's water is far from 100 percent, its quality has been in decline for decades. The main reason is obvious – it's the massive expansion of the dairy industry. A single cow has the pollution footprint of 14 people. "If you look at New Zealand's population in cow terms, we basically turn into Japan.

"The industry has grown so rapidly over the last 20 years that New Zealand is now the world's largest dairy exporter, but the white gold has its dark side. With a cow population the equivalent to 90 million humans, the effluent has to go somewhere. And that somewhere is into New Zealand's rivers and lakes."

The issue was highlighted two years ago when an outbreak of gastroenteritis in Havelock North saw over 5000 of the town's 14,000 residents become ill; 45 of them were hospitalised, and three deaths were possibly linked to the event. The outbreak was traced to contamination of two bores on the outskirts of the Hawke's Bay town.

Sisters of Mercy and their ministries in New Zealand have been involved in recent years in working to restore waterways. The initiatives include support for a community garden in Dunedin, reclamation of an urban wetland in Ellerslie, where a programme of replanting with indigenous species has seen a return of native birds and wildlife, and intensive cleaning and replanting along the banks of suburban streams in West and South Auckland.

Individual sisters and communities have focused on reducing their consumption of red meat, conserving water, growing their own vegetables and using food scraps to feed worm farms as a source of compost for their gardens.

Major issues relating to water in New Zealand include the debate over exporting bottled water, deciding who owns water, and ensuring the rights of Māori to a resource over which they often lay traditional claim. In what is regarded as a world-first, Māori living on the banks of the Whanganui, New Zealand's third-longest river, succeeded last year in gaining a settlement that confers the legal status of a person on the river. Local Māori say the status reflects their long-standing belief that the river is a living entity and an ancestor that helps to create their identity and sense of belonging.

There is growing concern today not only for rivers and lakes, but for the world's oceans as well. Greenpeace is currently urging the New Zealand Government to support the creation of an Antarctic Ocean sanctuary, to help ensure the survival of whales, seals and penguins whose habitat is under increasing threat from climate change and large-scale fishing of krill, on which these other species depend.

"We need to unite our voices in a single cause," Pope Francis told the international dialogue on water last year. "Then it will no longer be a case of hearing individual or isolated voices, but rather the plea of our brothers and sisters echoed in our own, and the cry of the earth for respect and responsible sharing in a treasure that belongs to all."

– **Dennis Horton**

## A RITUAL FOR WORLD WATER DAY

*All that is needed for this simple ritual is a bowl of clean water. The leader begins by sharing this short reflection:*

Tihei mauri ora!

We are gathered on holy ground.

Where we are is holy, and we are holy too.

We bless this bowl of water,

as we remember the moment in time

when the Spirit hovered over the waters,

to give meaning to the chaos

and life to all creatures of our Earth.

*The bowl of water is sprinkled among the group.*

Ko te wai te ora o ngā mea katoa:

Water is the life of all that lives.

When the waters break, the new child is born.

Through the waters of baptism, we are reborn.

Water links us to all the oceans of the world,

and ties us back to the birthplace of all life.

All the water that has ever existed is within

our ecosystem now, there is no other source of

supply beyond what we already hold for ourselves

and for generations still to come.

### **Inoi – Prayer**

*E te Kaiwhakaora,*

*Sustaining God,*

*Create in us such a sense of delight*

*in this water and in all the gifts of Papatūānuku*

*that we may receive them with grateful hearts,*

*care for them with love,*

*and generously share them with all that lives,*

*in Mercy's name. Amen.*