

Of Wolves and Water

by Greg Lowan

Both Easterners and Westerners refer to the land as the mother of humanity. How then can anyone who does injury to Mother Earth be considered civilized (Rong, 2008)?

In *Wolf Totem*, a recent Chinese bestseller, Rong (2008) describes the intimate relationship between the nomadic Mongolian grassland people and wolves. The grasslanders simultaneously depend on, fear and worship wolves as the ultimate rulers of the grasslands. Based on centuries of experience, they recognize the important role of wolves in maintaining the ecological balance of their environment. *Wolf Totem* describes the nomads' struggle under the threat of government-sponsored colonists who were determined to subdue and transform the grasslands for agricultural purposes during the Chinese Communist Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

While reading *Wolf Totem* one leisurely morning, I was suddenly interrupted by a flash flood in my neighbourhood. Heavy rain and high temperatures left my entire neighbourhood under a foot of water. Many basements were filled to the ceiling causing extensive damage. I was immediately struck by the similarity between the simultaneous fear / worship relationship of the Mongolian grasslanders with wolves and peoples' relationship all around the world with water. While this phenomenon may be embodied in different ways in different areas, there is a consistency in our common worship, dependence on, and fear of water that transcends culture and geography. We are dependent on water for life, hypnotized by its many forms, and fearful of its awesome destructive power.

In our increasingly interconnected global society, conflicts over water take many forms. In this article I explore several cases of water conflict, and interweave these with observations from *Wolf Totem*. Similar to the

Mongolian nomads and their struggle to preserve grasslands, many people involved in current water conflicts are wrestling to preserve local water access and management in the face of increasing global political and economic pressure.

The Mongolian Grassland

Rong (2008) relates the semi-autobiographical experience of Chen, a Han Chinese university student who is forcefully relocated to the inner Mongolian grasslands in 1969 during the Cultural Revolution. Along with other Han Chinese students, Chen is hosted by an Indigenous Mongolian grassland community. Chen spends several years learning traditional skills, such as shepherding and hunting, the teaching of which is infused with the traditional shamanistic beliefs of the Mongolian grasslanders.

Central to the grasslanders' belief system is wolf worship. Wolves represent the pinnacle of mastery and nobility of the grassland environment. The Mongolians have learned how to survive and thrive in the grasslands by observing the habits and practices of the wolves. Chen observes the Mongolians mimicking wolves' strategies in everything from hunting, trapping and warfare to structuring their society.

The Mongolian grasslanders and their wolf cousins seem engaged in an endless dance — vicious in one moment, reverent the next. Every night shepherds must stay awake watching over their herds of sheep, goats and horses to protect them from wolf attacks. At one point Rong (2008) describes a full-scale wolf hunt that occurs in retaliation for the massacre of a hundred horses by an especially vengeful wolf pack. Chen observes that while the Mongolian hunters relish the battle, exterminating 50 wolves in an elaborate trap, they also express remorse for killing those that they hold in such high regard.

For millennia the Mongolians have been keenly aware of the wolves' role in maintaining ecological balance on the grasslands. For example, wolves routinely feed on gazelles, marmots and other small rodents such as mice, voles and squirrels. The Mongolians recognize that the wolves are needed to regulate these populations, thus ensuring that the grasslands are preserved for their own grazing herds. If the wolves were eradicated or restricted from their feeding routine, gazelle and rodent populations would explode, reducing the grazing pastures to stubble and pock-marking the grasslands with leg-breaking burrows. It is in the Mongolians' best interest, then, to ensure that wolf populations are preserved. This position often creates conflict with communist government authorities who view the wolves as fearsome pests that should be indiscriminately exterminated. Similar clashes in perspective on how humans ought to interact with the nonhuman world are right now resonating around the globe. The growing global water crisis is a prime example of this kind of conflict.

Water

Human beings cannot live without water. A quick review of basic science reminds us that our bodies are composed of approximately 75% water and that 70% of the Earth's surface is covered by water. We all use water in different forms for cooking, bathing, recreation and transportation. There is no denying that water is a vital building block of life. While modern Western cultures might recognize this merely as scientific fact, others have long histories of worshipping water as sacred. The world's population continues to increase at an alarming rate, and within this "global village" more and more people are scrambling to emulate a highly consumptive Western lifestyle. As a result of rapidly increasing populations and lifestyle expectations, issues of water access and management are at the forefront of many peoples' consciousness. People are dying of thirst, starvation and disease due to lack of access to clean water. Water is becoming a central issue even to wars.

While we all recognize the necessity of water for life, we simultaneously fear its wrath. Recent examples from around the world of natural water-related disasters are readily identifiable. In 2004 there was the tsunami that killed over 200,000 people. In 2005 it was Hurricane Katrina and the devastation in New Orleans. And just this past September floods in the Philippines displaced some 450,000 people. On a smaller scale I am reminded of the recent flooding of my own neighbourhood in central Calgary. I found it ironic that while I was struggling to keep water out of our basement, I was simultaneously gaining sustenance from sipping it.

India

Shiva (2002) describes the global water crisis from an Indian perspective. She relates that water is sacred in Indian culture. For example, India itself is named after the Indus River. Punjab, a recognizable cultural, linguistic and geographical name, literally means "five rivers." Perhaps the most famous example is the Ganges River – in Indian mythology, the Ganges was given to the people by the Gods. Throughout India the Ganges is believed to have cleansing and healing powers. It serves as the site of many religious practices.

India also has a long history of successful communal water management (Shiva, 2002). Indian communities traditionally maintained water temples that were communally managed by the landless caste and freely available to all community members. These water temples contained cisterns for drinking and cooking water while also controlling irrigation for agriculture. These practices persisted successfully for centuries until British colonialists forced foreign water management techniques on villagers with drastic results. Compounded by the building of hydroelectric dams and water privatization forced upon them by the World Bank, many Indian communities face famine due to a lack of water for drinking and agriculture. However, Shiva (2002) also notes that several communities, often led by women's groups, have fought back against government and multinational interests, reclaimed their water

systems and successfully returned to their traditional methods. These examples serve as beacons of hope that local people may successfully confront government and multinational forces to take control of their own communities.

Elsewhere

Shiva (2002) and Midkiff (2007) also describe the global water crisis as it is unfolding in other regions of the world. Shiva (2002) describes conflicts over water access between nations such as Israel and Palestine and the various countries of the Nile Basin (Egypt, Congo, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda) as well as internal conflicts in Bolivia, China and Turkey. Midkiff (2007) discusses the current water crises in the United States, such as the conflict with Mexico over access to and use of the Rio Grande and the Colorado River.

Water conflict in Bolivia is perhaps one of the most highly publicized cases of the potential hazards of privatization (Midkiff, 2007; Shiva 2002). Under pressure from the World Bank, the Bolivian government allowed a consortium of private companies to take control of its public water system. The consortiums promised to restore and repair the aging system while keeping costs at a reasonable rate for citizens. Unfortunately, they did not stay true to their promises and soon raised water rates well beyond the means of average Bolivians. This betrayal prompted large-scale outrage and protest from the Bolivian people, eventually resulting in the government regaining control over their water system. Although rates have returned to pre-privatization levels, consistently supplying adequate water to the Bolivian people still remains a challenge.

Internal conflicts over water management have also occurred in China and Turkey (Shiva, 2002). In China approximately 60 million people have been displaced from their homes due to the construction of hydroelectric dams. While in Turkey, citizens who speak out about water issues in volatile areas risk being labeled as separatist

extremists. These are just a few examples of water issues that are currently pandemic in our interconnected world.

The United States

Midkiff (2007) and others (eg. Barlow and Clarke, 2002) describe in detail the growing assortment of water crises in North America. Midkiff (2007) suggests that, similar to other regions of the world, privatization has become a major issue in many American cities. He provides several examples where the privatization of a city's water systems has resulted in increased cost and decreased quality for its citizens (eg. Atlanta).

Midkiff (2007) also discusses other issues such as endemic water shortages in agricultural areas and large western cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Phoenix and Las Vegas. He provides interesting historical insight into water management in the United States. Midkiff suggests that traditional European principles of public water access were supplanted by the Manifest Destiny mentality during western expansion that positioned waterways as private resources that could be exclusively controlled by the first colonial settlers of a region. Part of the Manifest Destiny mentality was an attitude that the wild rivers of the West were dangerous foes that should be subdued and controlled in a similar fashion to the region's Indigenous peoples.

Midkiff (2007) proposes that the practices of the early settlers in the American West laid the foundation for their current water crises. He highlights several cases in agricultural and urban water management. For example, Midkiff suggests that the insatiable appetites of average Americans (and their northern neighbours and business partners) for water hungry non-indigenous crops such as rice, have forced farmers in the American West to deplete the Ogallala and other central and western aquifers at an alarming rate. Some western farmers have already drained their wells dry, rendering their arid farmland useless.

The same western farmers find themselves in continual conflict with large cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Phoenix and Arizona for water diverged from large rivers such as the Rio Grande and Colorado River. While the daily water needs of these large western cities are artificially supported through extensive irrigation canals, the farmers that produce their food struggle to irrigate their crops (Midkiff, 2007).

The solutions proposed by American government and corporations to the current water crises are diverse (Midkiff, 2007). Their ideas range from large-scale desalinization of seawater to towing Arctic icebergs and water bladders filled with fresh Canadian water down the West Coast. However, Midkiff suggests that these kinds of solutions are not adequate. He proposes that the only long-term solutions for North America's water crises involve wide-ranging lifestyle changes focused on reducing our water-dependency. He provides several examples such as eating less meat and water dependent produce, driving and flying less, using less water at home, buying locally, not buying bottled water and supporting public water access. Midkiff also notes that stricter industrial and agricultural laws that encourage the use of less water dependent processes, crops and animals will also help to reduce North American water consumption.

One can't help but see the irony in the global water situation – while people fight starvation caused by drought, famine and thirst in India and other poor regions, North Americans are politely asked to reduce their water consumption for the greater good – a striking contrast in perspective and power.

Final Thoughts

Wolf Totem gives us insight into the lives of the nomadic Mongolian grassland people who simultaneously revere, fear and inextricably depend on wolves. Based on centuries of locally developed wisdom, they recognize the wolves' integral place in maintaining the ecological balance of the grasslands (Rong,

2008). The nomads' indigenous knowledge and practices clash with the desires of the Chinese authorities who aim to eradicate the wolves. The government hopes to clear the grassland of its wild elements, making it safe for high-yielding agriculture to feed the overpopulated southern regions of China.

Similar clashes between foreign and local interests abound in current water politics. While some have successfully fought to preserve equitable, locally directed public access to water, others have fallen prey to the greed and insatiable thirst of private corporations, governments and the unsustainable lifestyles of large, artificially supported metropolises. Some cultures honour water as sacred, while others simply recognize that it is a vital source of life. No matter which perspective you subscribe to, there is no question that we are in the midst of a global water crisis. Perhaps combining the wisdom of ancient cultures with creative contemporary problem solving will help us to quench our collective thirst.

References

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