

# UNESCO

in Action:



## The International Year of Freshwater 2003



# UNESCO in Action: The International Year of Freshwater 2003



**T**oday, we face increasing freshwater scarcity, pollution and water-related disasters. These are affected by population growth, agricultural demand, energy requirements, urbanization, economic growth and industry, globalization, technological and lifestyle changes, recreation and tourism, climate changes and geopolitical changes. As multifaceted as the water crisis is, so too must be our responses to it.

The United Nations has taken on this challenge and in order to reinforce political will and consolidate action in society to find solutions to the water problem, it designated 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater, embracing the proposal set forth by Tajikistan. The Year, launched on 12 December 2002 and celebrated throughout the world, is coming to a close at UNESCO Headquarters on 20 January 2004. UNESCO was one of the two organizations of the UN system, with UN DESA of New York, designated to lead the events of the Year. The goals of the Year were thus to mobilize the world to become aware of the critical state of freshwater and educate about our unsustainable water consumption and exploitation.

UNESCO and UN DESA collaborated and shared responsibilities in an exemplary manner in conducting the joint Secretariat for the Year and the vast range of activities that this entails. This document primarily summarizes UNESCO's involvement in the promotion and observance of the Year.

UNESCO was highly visible throughout the Year's very varied and multidisciplinary events and activities, many of which were initiated by UNESCO and its partners. The Year's official website and newsletter, designed and maintained by UNESCO, played a key role in disseminating the Year's activities, providing a platform for exchange (notably with NGOs and civil society) and inspiring people of all ages and in many different ways to become actively aware of and involved in the myriad manifestations of water.

The Year has proven to be an opportunity for UNESCO to help mainstream the water question and water education, and build up a comprehensive UNESCO water framework based on its existing fields of competence in education, science, and culture and communication.



UNESCO's Director-General, Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, has placed water as one of the organization's highest priorities, and he himself was very active throughout the Year from its launching onward through numerous visits, and across his many messages and addresses on different occasions. Of note, he gave several talks at the 3rd World Water Forum, where he led the substantial UNESCO delegation and from which UNESCO emerged as a driving force in freshwater issues within the UN system and the global community.

UNESCO's approach to water rests within the larger UN mission dedicated to promoting peace and attaining security in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These goals set the target of halving by 2015 the proportion of people unable to reach, or afford, safe drinking water, and halting the unsustainable exploitation of water resources by developing water management strategies at the regional, national and local levels, considering equitable access and adequate supplies.

The International Year of Freshwater rode on the momentum of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, September 2002), which was seminal in that it placed water and sanitation at the centre of the sustainable development debate on par with energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity. Its Plan of Implementation reaffirmed the MDGs, and added the goal of halving the proportion of people without access to basic sanitation, also by 2015, with the target of establishing national water resources management strategies by 2005.

His Royal Highness Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, President to the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND), was nominated by the Director-General as UNESCO Special Envoy for Water. This nomination has been instrumental in raising awareness on critical freshwater issues at various levels, including high-level decision makers, and in encouraging countries to adopt appropriate institutions, policies and legislation for sustainable water management in line with the MDGs and the Johannesburg goals.

UNESCO has put itself in an excellent position to help attain these goals: from the scientific and awareness-raising activities of the International Hydrological Programme (IHP) and the active involvement of its worldwide National Committees; to the establishment of the UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education; to the launching of the UN system-wide World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP), hosted by UNESCO, which produced the World Water Development Report. This comprehensive water framework buttressed the extensive organizational, strategic and communications work performed by its ad hoc IYFW Secretariat.



One of UNESCO's most important accomplishments in the International Year of Freshwater (IYFW) was in terms of its educational projects and awareness-building tools, geared towards all ages, all countries, and all professions through websites, newsletters, publications, brochures, media kits, exhibitions, and partnerships. These generated thousands of activities on local, national and international levels.

The IYFW Secretariat had a particularly busy year with respect to outreach, notably through the official website and newsletter that provided tools for individuals to become aware of the issues at stake and groups around the world to take action in their communities. The website has in fact been cited as an important source of information by several other websites, has won many awards, prizes and distinctions, and was featured on national and international websites for its content. The National Resources Defence Council (NRDC), for example, promoted the IYFW website as one of the best websites on the Internet to inform the public about issues on the environment, sustainability and related topics (the NRDC is one of the most effective environmental NGOs in the United States).

The IYFW website generated a phenomenal response throughout the Year, almost 2 million hits. In addition to disseminating the Year's activities in English, French and Spanish, it served as a platform for individuals and organizers to publicize their own events (the Events Calendar offered a space to post scientific, technical and public awareness events throughout the Year), a forum in which to contribute their knowledge, and as a means of access to information on everything from the water cycle, floods, droughts, and deserts, to consumption and conservation, health, and culture, to agriculture, industry and energy.

In the Facts and Figures section, one could find simple summaries of important issues relating to water resources, but head to the Water Library if more in-depth information was required for research purposes. The Education Corner, aimed at children, youth, parents and teachers, offered free educational material on water in English, French and Spanish, and provided publications, programmes and pages with games and a colouring book put together by the IYFW Secretariat. The Education Corner has been featured as an important, complete and comprehensive educational resource.

Other sections of the website (Water Talk, Water Proverbs and Activity, Water in Different Languages and Game, Water Comic Book, Postcards, Myths and Stories, UN World Water Assessment Photo Library) helped to develop a worldwide culture of water, bringing water to life in all of its social, cultural,

religious manifestations (including a list of 6000 ways to say water). These pages were also put together by the Secretariat thanks to the enormous input received from individuals, groups, NGOs, and governments from across the globe.

Splash!, the official newsletter of the International Year of Freshwater, also created and maintained by UNESCO, was equally successful (40,000 email readers, 27,500 online readers, plus 30 ad hoc Internet mailing lists). Available every 3 weeks in English, French and Spanish, the idea was to inspire and educate the public at large in a fun way. Content varied with respect to UN celebrated days, features on the website and the exchange between the Secretariat and people from all walks of life. The success of Splash! suggests that this type of tool to inform and educate could be utilized for the forthcoming International Decade for Action 'Water for Life' (2005-2015).

Many other interactive events helped celebrate the world of water throughout the Year. The Water Drop travelling exhibit was launched at the Water Dome during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. It has since partaken in the opening ceremony of the Year at UN Headquarters in New York and at the 3rd World Water Forum in Osaka, Japan. It has also been displayed in Madrid at the Fundación Canal Isabel II and at the UN in Geneva, and will appropriately close the Year in Paris at UNESCO Headquarters where the closing ceremony will be held. The Water Drop exhibit is a circular enclosure of approximately 5 meters in diameter, made up of multimedia and graphic components presented on projection screens and free-standing panels that display and activate graphic and text information from the water-related programmes of UN agencies and other partners. The implementation of the Water Drop was achieved through the collaboration of the Dutch Government, UN DESA and WWAP.



**T**he 3rd World Water Forum was the major event of the Year and a watershed, so to speak, for UNESCO in that it provided an opportunity to consolidate and showcase the breadth and scope of UNESCO's freshwater activities.

The Forum is the premier global freshwater event that takes place every three years. Held in Kyoto, Japan, 16 to 23 March 2003, the 2003 Forum offered over 300 hundred sessions across over 30 themes and numerous special events, and received more than 24,000 participants. In line with the Forum's call for action and articulation of 'proven actions and best practices', UNESCO emerged as a leader on water-related issues, receiving comprehensive press coverage at the Forum, as shown by nearly 500 press clippings.

Both the long-established UNESCO International Hydrological Programme (IHP) and the UN-based/UNESCO-hosted World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP) were highly visible participants of the Forum. At the Forum, the IHP bolstered its prestige on freshwater issues, successfully conducting a number of the high-profile themes, notably on Water for Peace, Water, Education and Capacity Building, Groundwater and Water and Cultural Diversity, plus several other themes and specific sessions. Water Information Day, co-convened by UNESCO, organized specific sessions on the IHP among others. And the central event on World Water Day (22 March) was the launch of the first issue of the WWAP's World Water Development Report.

Also at the Forum, the agreement for the establishment of the UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education, the newest pillar of the UNESCO water family, was formalized with the Government of the Netherlands. The Institute reinforces UNESCO's message that a more integrated approach to water and its management depends on an educated society, especially the training of those who will work across the various fields of water management, water science and engineering, environmental science, municipal water and infrastructure, and within the specializations that lie within those fields.

- ▶ How can we prevent more than 3 million people from dying each year of waterborne diseases?
- ▶ How can we curb the overexploitation of water resources?
- ▶ How can we ensure that everyone has access to clean drinking water?

The first pillar of the UNESCO water family, the intergovernmental programme IHP, established in 1975, has long anticipated the international freshwater concerns. The IHP provides a scientific basis for evaluating global water resources and formulating ethical and socio-economic principles to guide water management and development practices with a strong educational component. Over the years, its programme has increasingly recognized and adapted to the multifaceted nature of freshwater issues with a people-centred and policy-oriented focus.

In celebration of the Year, all of the relevant IHP-activities at local, national, regional and international levels were reoriented to enhance and publicize the Year's objectives. National Committees and regional offices were invited to take their own initiatives, and the Year saw an impressive range of worldwide scientific and awareness-raising events through conferences, symposiums, training courses, forums, contests, and workshops, all publicized on the website.

Among other research and educational materials, this Year saw the IHP's timely publication of *World Water Resources*, which provides an updated assessment of the world's freshwater resources based on a decade of international, cooperative research. The UNESCO Water Portal, IHP's and WWAP's scientific and professional web platform, also took on a very visible role as a model for water information sharing and cooperation.

The other major publication that immensely contributed to promoting the International Year of Freshwater was the UN World Water Development Report (WWDR), *Water for People, Water for Life*, produced by the WWAP, the first issue of which was launched in Kyoto. The volume targets a wide range of audiences as well as those involved in the formulation and implementation of water-related policies and investments, with the aim of influencing strategies and practices at local, national, and international levels.

UNESCO played the role of coordinator and catalyst for the creation of the WWAP in March 2000, which pools the knowledge of 23 UN agencies and other entities concerned with freshwater in order to provide a systematic, ongoing, comprehensive and global picture of freshwater and its management. A key current component of the WWAP is the development of a set of user-friendly indicators for the water sector, in collaboration with IHP and other UN agencies, which are meaningful to decision makers and to the public. Its key output, every 3 years, is the WWDR. UN Water, the interagency coordinating body on freshwater, provides an oversight of the WWDR.

- ▶ What extent will population growth, rising levels of pollution and climate change intensify the world's water crisis?
- ▶ Exactly how much water is available per person in different countries around the world?
- ▶ How much water will we need for food security over the next 15, 25 and 50 years?
- ▶ The international community has pledged to reduce by half the proportion of people without access to water supply and sanitation by 2015. What regions of the globe are on track to reach this target?
- ▶ How much will it cost to achieve these goals?
- ▶ What is the likelihood of international conflicts over water in the near future?

The monitoring and assessment of these domains and others are cornerstone to appropriate water development and management, and they require social, cultural, ethical, and economic responses built on similar lines.



*Freshwater must be recognized on an international level as a common good and heritage. This notion, which emphasizes the importance of sharing, would also be a contribution to peace, as water is increasingly becoming a strategic issue.*

Koïchiro Matsuura, Herald Tribune, March 2003

Cooperation is of the essence, and UNESCO has, on the occasion of the Year, undertaken numerous joint initiatives, once again building upon and extending its existing fields of competence.

The Water for Peace programme is one such initiative that utilizes the assessment work already undertaken within IHP and WWAP and combines it with the resources and expertise of Green Cross International to foster peaceful cooperation between nations that share vital water resources.

The Solidarity Fund for Safe Water for All was also established during the Year to support the assessment of water availability and vulnerability at a scale appropriate for water supply and sanitation development. Phase 1 of the Fund is scheduled to undertake the task of determining water availability for the whole African continent.

Other forms of support throughout the Year include UNESCO's presence at the Pan-African Conference on Water Resources (December 2003, Ethiopia), which aimed to influence implementation strategies and issues, and provide input towards attaining solid inter/intra African partnership commitments.

Numerous other partnerships were forged within UNESCO and the larger UN system, as well as with governments, NGOs, academic institutions, and the private sector on international and local levels.

Responding to the request of the UN Secretariat, 69 National Focal Points were nominated to publicize the Year's goals and assist in event support and planning in their country, 36 of which were the respective IHP National Committees. UNESCO's support in encouraging Member States to nominate a National Focal Point for the Year, to act as contacts and promoters of the Year in their country, is noteworthy. Country pages on the website were made available to Focal Points in order to showcase their country's myriad cultural events, from news issues to youth activities, from poetry to drawing contests,

to television series, seminars and conferences, all held under the theme of the International Year of Freshwater. The UNESCO team also encouraged the National Focal Points to contribute to Splash! and to develop partnerships with NGOs and organizations in their community to become more involved in the Year. They were also given permission to grant the use of the official WaterYear logo, making it more available to their community, hence further promoting the Year.

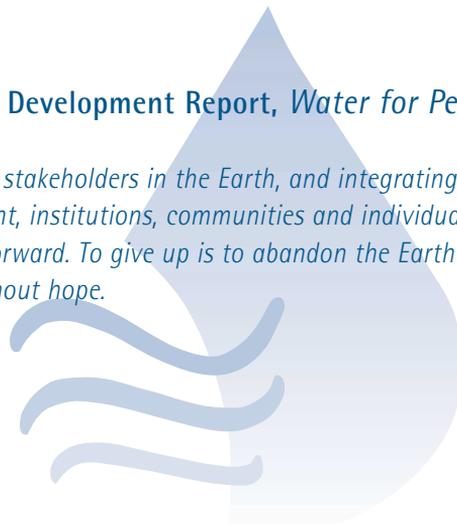
**I**n line with the Year's overarching goals, and the 3rd World Water Forum's call to action, UNESCO's major contribution to dialogue, interaction and tool development lie in its recognition that 'drawing on synergies' must be the priority if water is to become an opportunity for cooperation and peace.

At the close of the International Year of Freshwater, and the approaching International Decade for Action, 'Water for Life', 2005-2015, the Director-General's message for UNESCO is that we need to adopt, and commit to, a new water culture, 'one that combines caring, sparing and sharing'.

Building a new water culture means finding new ways of managing water wisely on all levels: individually, locally, regionally, nationally, globally, making water everybody's business. It means pooling together people and organizations, exchanging practical information supported by sound research and experiences that have proven successful in solving water-related problems. It means making education a cornerstone to building awareness of the urgency of the state of freshwater today.

## World Water Development Report, *Water for People, Water for Life:*

*We are all stakeholders in the Earth, and integrating the efforts of government, institutions, communities and individuals is the only way in which to press forward. To give up is to abandon the Earth and its inhabitants to a world without hope.*





## Contacts:

### International Hydrological Programme (IHP)

UNESCO/Division of Water Sciences  
1, rue Miollis  
75732 Paris Cedex 15, France  
Tel: (+33) 1 45 68 40 01  
Fax: (+33) 1 45 68 58 11  
Email: [ihp@unesco.org](mailto:ihp@unesco.org)  
Website: [www.unesco.org/water/ihp](http://www.unesco.org/water/ihp)  
[www.wateryear2003.org](http://www.wateryear2003.org)

### World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP)

Secretariat  
c/o UNESCO/Division of Water Sciences  
1, rue Miollis  
75732 Paris Cedex 15, France  
Tel: (+33) 1 45 68 39 28  
Fax: (+33) 1 45 68 58 29  
Email: [wwap@unesco.org](mailto:wwap@unesco.org)  
Website: [www.unesco.org/water/wwap](http://www.unesco.org/water/wwap)

### UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education

P.O. Box 3015  
2601 DA Delft, The Netherlands  
Tel: (+31) 15 215 17 15  
Fax: (+31) 15 212 29 21  
Email: [info@unesco-ihe.org](mailto:info@unesco-ihe.org)  
Website: [www.unesco-ihe.org](http://www.unesco-ihe.org)