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## What Is a River to Us?

By Sandra Finley

*Sandra Finley, a well-known Saskatchewan activist, attended a water symposium by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) in Winnipeg in late September 2005. This is her response to the question "Are there best practices that should be analyzed further which were not among those presented at the symposium?"*

I understand that "best management practices" (BMPs) inevitably restrict ideas to the current "box" or paradigm, whatever that might be. (A paradigm is a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for the community that shares them.)

Intellectual rigour and creativity is served by asking the *a priori* question: is our worldview the best worldview in which to construct our responses to the water problems we face? (I am reminded of Einstein's statement that you cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them.)

During the symposium, there was brief reference to a "different" worldview held by "them." It was tacitly accepted that we will operate under our own view, within our own box or paradigm. But it is a mistake not to first ensure that our "box" is the "best box." We should search *first* for the best box, and *then* for the BMPs within that box, if we are to progress.

An illustrative example of the straitjacket imposed by inferior paradigms, and how you must move from one paradigm to another if you are to achieve effective problem-solving in a society, comes from the particular worldview of women in a society. There you can see that the worldview is an attitude. The attitude we bring to a situation is a determinant of the outcome.

In relation to water, we have "their" worldview and "our" worldview. Which worldview makes the most sense? Which one provides us with "right attitudes," which will then equip us to deal effectively with the situation before us? (It is not even possible to solve problems if the wrong attitude is brought to bear – indeed the attitude can determine that the problem is *not* solvable.)

In my view, through our paradigm we display gross ignorance in our attitude to water.

There are many societies that have understood their dependence. The things upon which the society is dependent are sacred. It is not superstition; it is good common sense. You cherish the things upon which your life depends. Your grandchildren will be as dependent as you. You protect the gift so they too may enjoy the abundance you enjoy.

Step back and look at us as eyes from the future will see us.

Running through our land we have this River. Use the South Saskatchewan River, for example – it delivers water to the residents of Calgary, Medicine Hat, and Saskatoon. We have diversion schemes to take the water to many, many communities – some, such as Regina and Humboldt, a long way from the River. We drink the River's water from our taps; we use it to wash our clothes, to water our gardens and our livestock, to grow our crops, and as a dumping ground for processed human excrement and industrial effluent. It is used to generate the electrical power for our stoves, refrigerators, and air conditioning. The gifts of the River are more than I can tell you.





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But which one of us has today given thanks for that River? Who among us has ever kneeled down on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River in humility and gratitude? Have you ever taken the time to reflect, to acknowledge what the River is to us? There is no life without the gift of water.

Outsiders do and will look at our society in amazement: how is it that these people did not understand their relationship to the River? Can you imagine that they never expressed gratitude? Maybe that was why they could abuse their water supplies.

Yes, we display ignorance; it is built into our paradigm. We are trapped within our box. Our BMPs have to come from a different box. There we will find the solutions that will elude us should we persist in a faulty worldview.

In the same way as we are shifting paradigms in our attitudes to women in society, a process that takes time and is disruptive in the short term, it is possible and necessary to begin a shift in relation to water. When we know that it is sacred, when we somehow learn the ability to express reverence, when we know it is part of us, when we have the right attitude, then we will begin to be able to make real and lasting progress.

“Their” different worldview should not be dismissed. It is obviously superior to ours because it leads to protection of that upon which we are totally dependent for survival. It is common sense. Without it we will not have sustainability.

