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thirst

A film by alan sni tow
and deborah kaufman



From Cochabamba, Bolivia, to Stockton,
California—How Multinationals Are
Working to Control Our Water

a guide to the film for teachers and discussion leaders



Sierra Club introduction

Carl Pope, Sierra Club executive director



We can no longer take water for granted. In this beautiful and engaging film, people spill blood over water in Bolivia, figure out ingenious ways to conserve it in India, and try to protect it from profiteers in the United States. All over the world, communities need help in securing safe drinking water; one out of six people lacks a decent supply. The question of who the providers will be—private firms seeking a profit or public entities focused on the common good—is becoming one of the big global battles of the 21st century. Filled with compelling scenes and voices, *Thirst* is the kind of documentary that will move you off the sofa and into action.

Thirst, a one-hour film, is an official 2004 selection of "P.O.V.", PBS's acclaimed documentary series.

www.pbs.org/pov/thirst

Thirst can be purchased or rented on DVD or VHS video. Previews are available for purchase evaluation to institutions with media collections.

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filmmakers' introduction

by Deborah Kaufman and Alan Snitow



We had heard some crazy stories about water: Corporations wanted to drag polar ice caps to the Middle East for profit. Billionaire oilmen wanted to pump underground aquifers in Texas and sell to the highest bidder. An entrepreneur wanted to suck water from two wild California rivers and ship it down the Pacific coast to Southern California in bags the size of football fields that he called “giant condoms.” These are the stories you hear at parties and as jokes on late-night TV. But when we learned that scandal-plagued and bankrupt energy company Enron was positioning itself to become one of the world’s largest water corporations, we knew something really big was happening.

And then it got personal. How come a bottle of water cost more than a gallon of gasoline? Why doesn’t anybody fix the broken water fountains at our public high schools? Why does the Bechtel Corporation—so busy in Saudi Arabia and postwar Iraq—want to run our local water supply, which until now has been running just fine under public control?

There are connections between conflicts for control of water here at home and far from our borders. Private-water lobbyists have declared their goal of controlling more of American public water systems in the next few years. The World Bank is helping to make water privatization a fact in most of the developing world by requiring countries to sell public water systems as a precondition to get loans. Water is the oil of the 21st century.

Human-rights activists and environmentalists have been the first to express concern about the future of water. But what’s at stake with the privatization of this scarce natural resource goes beyond the work of advocacy groups to the notion of democracy itself: Who will actually make the decisions that affect everyone’s future, and who will be excluded?

It’s striking that in every water story we researched for this film, corporations with household names like Coca-Cola and Nestlé were coming into cities to make deals that few citizens understood or even knew about. That convinced us to tell the water story from the point of view of the “water warriors,” those opposing corporate attempts to take over global water resources.

Water wars affect everyone. One of the most compelling aspects of water is not just its universality, but also the intensity of our involvement with it, and the elegant simplicity of the questions that the new battles over water raise: Is water a human right or just another commodity to be bought and sold in the market? Is it society’s role to protect our natural environment or to exploit it? Who gets to decide?

In a revealing moment in our production of *Thirst*, the pro-privatization mayor of Stockton, California, says that it’s time to “think of our citizens as customers.” When did this notion take hold? We were taught that government has another purpose beyond supplication to “the market,” that endangered natural resources aren’t consumer goods, and that people aren’t simply profit-producing consumers, but citizens who rely on one another in caring communities.

Thirst is designed to begin a conversation about these questions, and to show the human dimensions—what is at stake for everyday people—of this little-known global struggle for the future of humanity’s most essential natural resource.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.thirstthemovie.org

www.sierraclub.org/water



water basics

1. **Water is scarce.** By and large, the amount of water on Earth now is all there has ever been and all there will ever be. Essentially, we drink the same water that ran through Roman sewers 2,000 years ago; we wash in the same water as *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

Most of the earth's surface is water, but almost all of that is salt water or glaciers. Less than one percent is freshwater potentially available for human use and the environment. The United Nations says 2.7 billion people worldwide will face severe water shortages by 2025. Much of our water has been contaminated by industrial runoff, human sewage, and farm pesticides.

2. **Water is intrinsically cheap.** Over many decades, citizens have already paid for public water systems and their infrastructure. Because water has been seen as a public service rather than a commodity, rates have been kept low. Private companies see profit in raising these historically low rates.

3. **Water supply is a monopoly.** Towns and cities usually have just one water company and one set of pipes—whether public or private. That means there is no competition to keep prices down and quality high. Instead, prices and water quality have been regulated by public agencies.

4. **Water is essential.** There are no alternatives. We die without it—we have to have water no matter what the price.

These are the major reasons why corporations see profit in water, but the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights sees the resource differently. “The human right to drinking water is fundamental to life and health. Sufficient and safe drinking water is a precondition for the realization of human rights.”

Should water be treated as a market commodity, allocated through the marketplace to whomever can pay the price? Or is it a basic human right for all people, rich or poor?

municipal service or private profit?

Gary Podesto, the mayor of Stockton, California, strongly believes that a private consortium, OMI/Thames, will do a better job than city workers running Stockton's water and sewer system. He opposes a public vote to let the people decide, believing he and the city council can best deal with the complexities of water management. Will the promised cost savings be realized? Will the system be better-run? The citizens opposing the privatization believe the answer to both questions is no.

Dreda Gaines of Thames Water says Stockton “should have no concerns” about the company. But back home in England and Wales, there's a different story. The UK Environment Agency listed Thames as a top polluter in 1999 and 2000, based on number of prosecutions or size of pollution fines.

Thames is one of three European-based transnational companies that have aggressively marketed their services to U.S. mayors, after attempts to expand in developing countries like Bolivia hit major stumbling blocks. With 85 percent of the people in the United States now served by public water companies, these private companies see an opportunity to control the bulk of U.S. water services. Customers would pay the full cost of the service, plus a profit for the companies.

The transnationals have bought the three largest private water service providers in the United States.

- Vivendi bought USFilter (now Veolia) in 1999 for \$6.2 billion
- Suez bought United Water in 2000 for \$1.02 billion
- Thames bought American Water Works in 2003 for \$8.6 billion

These companies are now in a position to greatly increase privatization efforts. However, they no longer use the term “privatization,” which has become controversial. Instead, the companies and supporters like Mayor Podesto talk about “public-private

questions for discussion

At the World Water Forum, Thames CEO Bill Alexander says that his company will not go anywhere it is not wanted. Do you believe him?

How do you think Thames will be able to satisfy stockholders that they are profitable and still achieve the cost savings that the corporation promised Stockton?

Does democracy simply mean electing officials or does it also mean getting involved in critical decisions about your community?

In the United States, 85 percent of the population gets its drinking water from public systems. Do you think these systems could be run more efficiently by corporations?

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that cities need to spend \$151 billion to upgrade water delivery infrastructure over the next 20 years and another \$460 billion on sewage systems. How will local governments raise money for these purposes? How will private companies raise money?

partnerships” in which a city retains ownership of its water, contracting out the management, construction, and employment to a private company—which gets to take advantage of a city’s lower interest rates when borrowing while city mayors can avoid political responsibility for rising water rates, employee layoffs, and service cutbacks.

Critics of these partnerships say the change in terminology is an illusion: once a city cedes control of its water system, it will have a very hard time taking it back should something go wrong.

And things have gone wrong.

Atlanta canceled its 20-year contract with Suez/United Water—the biggest such contract in the United States—after just a few years because of poor performance. Primarily Spanish-speaking neighborhoods in Lawrence, Massachusetts, successfully organized to keep United Water out. And local businesspeople in Lexington, Kentucky, have mobilized to buy their utility back now that Thames is the owner. Meanwhile, the utility workers’ union in Indianapolis is fighting to keep USFilter from cutting workers’ pensions in order to show corporate profitability.

Back in California, *Thirst* shows Stockton residents signing petitions that would require a vote of the people on privatization. With limited resources, they were up against a consortium of two multinationals, OMI and Thames, which together donated \$75,000 in two weeks to defeat the petition. This raises serious questions about excessive corporate influence on the democratic process, all the more important when a public resource essential to life itself is involved. Concerned Citizens Coalition of Stockton has not given up despite being outgunned financially. Along with the Sierra Club, the group has been waging a court battle to stop the takeover by OMI/Thames, contending the privatization deal failed to comply with the state’s environmental laws.

Looking at these debates and the historical record of privatization in California, Norris Hundley, Jr., a leading water historian and author of *The Great Thirst*, concludes that “the public moves toward privatization at its peril.”

In developing countries, privatization is being driven by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which often require indebted countries to pursue privatization. That usually cuts local governments out of discussions. In Bolivia, the World Bank pressured the government to privatize water in the city of Cochabamba as a condition for getting new development loans.

Thirst documents the results of this policy. Very poor people had to pay up to 300 percent more for their water after Cochabamba put international giant Bechtel in charge. The people said “basta”—enough—and took to the streets. After force failed to quell the rebellion, the Bolivian government finally threw out the contract. Now Bechtel is suing Bolivia to recoup its investment.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Council of Canadians: www.canadians.org

Public Citizen’s Water for All Campaign: www.wateractivist.org

World Water Council: www.worldwatercouncil.org

activities

Research the history of your municipal water system. In what ways has the ownership and/or management of the system changed?

Talk with your mayor and find out whether he or she has been approached by a water corporation. If so, find out what they promise to provide. Would the mayor support having a public vote before any decision to privatize is taken?

Find out if your municipal water and sewer workers are represented by a union. If so, talk with union representatives to hear their side of the story.

If privatization of your municipal system is being considered, call for a community committee to be created, charged with evaluating the proposal.

Investigate whether there is a mechanism for the public to vote on any such proposal before a contract is signed.



from the bottle or the tap?

At the World Water Forum, Hiroshi Kanno from Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin, tells corporate officials that he had to mortgage his farm to finance his fight against a Nestlé plan to pump water from a nearby spring for sale in bottles. In India, a poor farmer sings, “Listen to the story of Rajasthan. Water is more expensive than milk. Here big companies are opposing us. They have bottled our water to sell.”

On the shelves of grocery stores, bottled water proliferates. In 2003, Americans paid \$8.3 billion for bottled water and sales continue to increase. In fancy hotels, “water sommeliers” advise diners on which boutique water to drink with each course.

It’s an amazing new fad, backed by one of the most successful advertising efforts in recent history. Commercials imply that drinking bottled water can make you thin, sexy, healthy, affluent, and even environmentally responsible. Water bottles have become a fashion accessory.

These ideas have a source, but it’s not a mountain spring. Giant multinational companies like Nestlé, Coca-Cola, and Pepsi are making a fortune on bottled water. In the United States, a sip of bottled water costs on average 1,000 times more than a sip of tap water.

In Michigan, Nestlé received \$9.6 million in tax breaks to site its Ice Mountain bottled-water plant in Mecosta County. Yet in Detroit, more than 40,000 families have had their water shut off because they were unable to pay their water bills when the state refused to provide a subsidy. How do such policies measure up to the United Nations declaration that “the human right to drinking water is fundamental to life and health”?

Many people think bottled water is safer than tap water. But there is no such guarantee. The EPA has strict water-quality standards for tap water, but the agency doesn’t oversee bottled water. Bottled water sold across state lines is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration. While the FDA requires bottled water to be sampled and analyzed, it relies on industry to perform the bulk of the sampling and analysis. Nor do FDA regulations prevent



questions for discussion

- Has your view of bottled water changed since viewing *Thirst*? If so, how?
- Are policies needed to protect groundwater?
- Are stricter standards needed for bottled water? For tap water?
- Should private bottling companies be allowed to pump water to sell bottled water for a profit?
- What comparisons can you make between the protests against Coca-Cola in Kerala, India, and the concerns of citizens in Mecosta County?
- In *Thirst*, Indian water-conservation leader Rajendra Singh calls for an international boycott of bottled water, while Michigan citizens are calling for a boycott of Nestlé water. What do you think such boycotts might accomplish?

activities

- E Magazine* reports: "When Good Morning America conducted a taste test of its studio audience, New York City tap water was chosen as the heavy favorite over the oxygenated water O2, Poland Spring, and Evian." Do a blind taste test with your friends and see what they choose.
- Look at the bottled-water labels on your local grocery shelves. Do they say where the water comes from? If so, see what you can find out about the environmental impacts. For help, see the EPA Web site listed below right.
- Get copies of reports to the EPA from your water and sewer authority. How often do they report? What are the findings?
- Talk with your municipal waste authority to find out how plastic bottles are disposed. If recycled, can you track where they actually go? What use is being made of the recycled plastic bottles? If they are incinerated, research what chemicals might be released. If landfilled, how close to capacity is your landfill?
- Research different brands of water filters to find out what kinds of chemicals they remove.

bottling companies from drawing water next to industrial sites, underground storage tanks, or dumps—though the agency does set standards for the bottled water itself.

After a Pennsylvania man reported getting sick from drinking bottled water, the state health department tested his water and found high levels of coliform bacteria. In 1998, an independent lab tested for hundreds of different chemicals in 38 brands of bottled water sold in California. Two samples had arsenic contamination, six had chemical byproducts of chlorination, and six had measurable levels of the toxic chemical toluene.

So consumers should not assume that bottled water is safer than tap water. In fact, Coca-Cola's Dasani and Pepsi's Aquafina are tap water coming from places like Queens, New York, and Jacksonville, Florida, with some additional treatment.

Nestlé prefers to market water drawn from springs. The pumping can have a significant environmental impact, sucking from underground aquifers that are the source of water for nearby streams, wells, and farms. In Mecosta County, Nestlé is fighting a judge's ruling that it must stop pumping from a site because of threats to the surrounding ecosystem. Nestlé has at least 75 spring sites around the country and is actively looking for more.

What about the bottles themselves? Every year about 1.5 million tons of plastic go into manufacturing water bottles for the global market, using processes that release toxics such as nickel, ethylbenzene, ethylene oxide, and benzene. In the United States alone, 1.5 million barrels of oil are consumed in making the bottles. Most bottles end up in landfills, adding to the landfill crisis.

This does not mean tap water is always as good as it could be, but when there is a problem, you can take action. For an immediate fix, you'll find it far cheaper to install a high-quality filter than to turn to the bottle. The average cost of filtered water is \$0.13 per gallon compared with \$1.27 for bottled water.

You can hold your public officials and the EPA accountable for the quality of your tap water, and you can urge your legislators to provide adequate funding for upgrading the water and sewer infrastructure.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Centre for Science and Environment: www.cseindia.org

Environmental Protection Agency drinking water reports: www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo.htm

Natural Resources Defense Council: www.nrdc.org

P.O.V.'s Borders: www.pbs.org/pov/borders/2004/water



global rules and institutions

Thirst opens at the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan. We hear Maude Barlow, chair of the citizens' group Council of Canadians, speaking of water as part of the global commons not to be privatized and sold to the highest bidder. As the film progresses, we hear voices from the World Bank, the water firms, and from activists around the globe. Two different worldviews are expressed. One sees water as a commodity and advocates that corporations take over the responsibility of governments to provide water. The other holds water an inalienable, even sacred, human right, and maintains that water should remain under community control as a public trust.

The World Water Forums are organized by the World Water Council to promote its vision of water as a commodity with the private sector playing a significant role in provision of water services through public-private partnerships in which cities contract with private companies to manage their water systems.

While the forum in Kyoto did have significant participation from the United Nations, government agencies from many countries, and a sprinkling of civil society groups, business groups dominated, hoping to win a consensus for privatization.

The issues came to a head at the session on financing water infrastructure when the former head of the International Monetary Fund, Michel Camdessus, released his report calling for more water privatization, including reduced risk, more credit, and investment guarantees for private companies. Activists from around the world responded with a humorous protest, holding up signs with lie detector meters and tinkling tiny bells.

Activists saw the Camdessus report as a prescription for more sweetheart deals between corporations and international financial institutions at the expense of the world's poor. They especially didn't like the barely disguised proposal to protect Suez and other giant corporations from public opposition. *Thirst* shows Oscar Olivera from Cochabamba tearing the report in half.

What role do the global rules and institutions play? Some say that they are linked together in a web that promotes corporate globalization.

Trade rules were originally all about lowering tariff barriers for manufactured goods. Today trade agreements under the World Trade Organization and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) cover all services, even essential ones like providing water. These rules encourage privatization of services by curtailing local control and potentially overturning local environmental laws, which could be ruled "burdensome." NAFTA and many



questions for discussion

There are many passionate voices in the film saying water should be a common good, while corporate spokespeople say the private sector can deliver water most efficiently. How do you see these issues? What does efficiency mean? Is there any kind of efficiency besides economic efficiency?

What are the consequences of treating water as a marketable good where the market determines its price? Who gains and who loses from such policies?

Klaus Toepfer, executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme, has said that water is a sacred good in many societies and should not be privatized. Do you agree or disagree?

Many people are saying that water is a human right. Why should water be treated any differently than any other product like shoes or tomatoes?

Should water, a basic necessity for human survival, be controlled by for-profit interests?

What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of community versus corporate provision of water services?

bilateral trade agreements even allow corporations to sue governments to protect their profits.

Global financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF promote economic development in poor countries, with a strong preference for the private sector. The IMF wants to be sure these countries can pay off their debts to the rich countries so they focus on encouraging production of cash crops that bring in foreign currency, but fail to provide food for local populations. The World Bank helps by providing financing for expensive dams and irrigation systems that benefit corporate investors and wealthy elites, and rarely improve the lives of the poor.

The IMF also imposes policies that require indebted countries to cut government spending and raise funds by privatizing their assets, including municipal water systems, which opens them to foreign ownership. The IMF wants consumers to pay the full cost of providing services, which has led to unaffordable increases in the cost of water.

Private water companies say they will bring in new capital to develop local water systems, but they often spend little of their own money. Instead, the World Bank and regional banks like the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) favor the companies with low-rate loans.

When Suez took over water services in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and needed a billion dollars for new infrastructure, it invested only \$30 million of its own capital. The rest came from the World Bank, IADB, and local banks. Suez reaped a 20 percent profit. When Suez started losing money because of Argentina's currency crisis, it pulled out—something a public utility can never do.

These policies often make water too expensive for the poor. From Cochabamba to Argentina, from South Africa to Ghana, people are rising up to reclaim control of their water resources.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Citizens Network on Essential Services: www.servicesforall.org

Polaris Institute's Operation Water Rights:
www.polarisinstitute.org

World Bank: www.worldbank.org/watsan

World Bank Boycott: www.econjustice.net/wbbb

activities

Research the record of Bechtel, Suez, and other corporations providing water services in developing countries.

Find out whether any institutions in your community, such as pension funds, labor unions, churches, municipal government, and colleges, have World Bank bonds as part of their investment portfolio.

Research how trade agreements like the WTO agreement on services (GATS) could impact the public provision of water and sewer services. What role have the European water corporations played in getting water services covered? Ask your elected officials what they know about the effects these trade agreements could have on public water and sewer services.



“The water cycle connects us all, and from water we can learn the path of peace and the way of freedom. We can learn how to transcend water wars created by greed, waste, and injustice, which create scarcity in our water-abundant planet. We can work with the water cycle to reclaim water abundance. We can work together to create water democracies. And if we build democracy, we will build peace.” —Vandana Shiva

positive solutions

Creating abundance out of scarcity. This is what we witness in *Thirst* as Rajendra Singh teaches poor Indian villagers how to use traditional community-based rainwater harvesting techniques. They dig ponds called *johads* to capture monsoon rains and allow the water to percolate into the ground, transforming a desert that had been written off by the Indian government as a “dark zone” of water scarcity.

A similar initiative created the miracle of small lakes on the Bamberger Ranch in arid Texas where invasive juniper trees were replaced with native grasses that draw rainwater into the ground. It’s what the Hopi have done in the Black Mesa of Arizona for over a thousand years by planting seeds deep into the soil to grow corn with vigorous roots. Patuwaqatsi, “Water is Life,” they say.

Millions of people have been affected by Singh’s work and by similar small-scale projects across India, many aimed at growing crops that conserve water and use drip irrigation, replacing water-guzzling, pesticide-dependent crops, and demonstrating an alternative to building mega-dams for irrigation.

Crossing Nebraska and other states in America’s breadbasket, you can see huge circular fields being watered by long arms spraying water into the sunny sky. What you can’t see is the depletion of the Ogallala aquifer running from South Dakota to the Texas panhandle. Drip irrigation, which delivers water directly to roots, has allowed farmers in India to raise their crop yields up to 50 percent while lowering their water use by as much as 60 percent. Why not in the United States?

There is some good domestic news. Los Angeles has grown by 30 percent since 1970 but uses no more water, thanks to conservation measures. The city provided low-water-use toilets to any willing household; the city could go further and retrofit buildings to catch rainwater to use for landscaping and flushing toilets—as is being done in Germany.

In *Thirst*, Rajendra Singh speaks of small local actions spreading around the globe. But he also worries that the Indian government is inviting private companies to come into areas to exploit water resources developed by local communities. Singh is responding to the threat by launching a nationwide campaign against privatization and in favor of water conservation.

When Peabody Coal began pumping 4,400 acre-feet of water per day from the Navajo aquifer around 1970, local springs dried up. Hopi call it paatski, the tearing up of the water. Coca-Cola threatened groundwater supplies in Kerala, India, while in the United States, Nestlé pumps large quantities of water from springs, drawing down groundwater and depleting streams.



questions for discussion

After seeing the film, are there changes you can make in the way you use water at home?

Are there ways that water use could be altered at your workplace, on your campus, or in your community?

Do any of these changes require more than local action? How might this be done?

activities

Contact your local water department to find out what your community is doing to conserve water.

Research the history of lawns to find out how much water is being used for them. How about golf courses?

Research examples of “xeriscaping,” the use of drought-tolerant native plants as replacements for water-hungry lawns.

Investigate ways to harvest rainwater from your roof for use in your garden.

Do a home water-use audit. Where could water be saved?

Visit a commercial farm to see how crops are being watered. Have alternative methods been considered?

Positive solutions must curtail the power of corporations to “mine” water for profit. In Kerala, India, the local governing council refused to renew Coca-Cola’s permit. In Michigan, citizens fighting Nestlé have won a court victory and are calling for a boycott of the company’s bottled-water brands.

In Stockton, citizens are challenging Thames Water in court and the company is meeting stiff resistance elsewhere. When the company was about to move into Montara, California, the citizens voted to sell municipal bonds to finance a take back of their system. The California Public Utilities Commission ordered the company to sell the system to Montara. Now other towns are mobilizing to take back their systems.

More and more cities are proving that their public water systems can improve efficiency without having to privatize. In Phoenix, San Diego, Miami, and Kings County, Washington, “re-engineering” has saved millions of dollars while keeping water systems public and locally controlled.

In Cochabamba, Oscar Olivera and a coalition of local citizens’ groups have banded together to take over their water utility, and running it democratically. Effective organizing around positive solutions can lead to victories.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Black Mesa Trust: www.blackmesatrust.org

Groundwater Foundation: www.groundwater.org

Pacific Institute: www.pacinst.org/reports/urban_usage

Rainwater Harvesting: www.newint.org/issue354/harvesting.htm

Tips for home conservation: www.h2ouse.org



further resources on water

MAGAZINES AND NEWSPAPERS:

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National Geographic, September 2002, "Water Pressure," by Fen Montaigne.

The New Yorker, April 8, 2002, "Leasing the Rain," by William Finnegan.

Outside, August 2003, "The Water Crisis—Special Report."

U.S. News & World Report, August 12, 2002, "The Coming Water Crisis," by Marianne Lavelle and Joshua Kurlantzick.

Yes! Winter 2004, "Whose Water?", articles by Maude Barlow, Tony Clarke, and others.

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"Diverting the Flow: A Resource Guide to Gender, Rights, and Water Privatization," Women's Environment and Development Organization, 2003.

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"The New Economy of Water," by Peter Gleick et al., February 2002, Pacific Institute.

"Rivers for Life," Sandra Postel and Brian Richter, Island Press, 2003.

"Trading Away Our Water," Ruth Caplan, Alliance for Democracy, 2003.

"The Water Barons," International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 2003.

"Water Follies, Groundwater Pumping and the Fate of America's Fresh Waters," John Glennon, Island Press, 2002.

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www.sierraclub.org/cac/water.