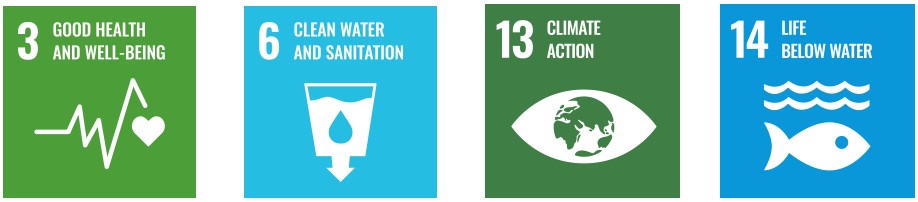

Declaration at UN 2023 Water Conference - in Support of Protections for Natural Water Systems

March 23, 2023 (World Water Day +1)

Dear UN-Water Secretariat, Excellencies, Members, Partners, and attendees of the UN 2023 Water Conference,

Please accept the following declaration on behalf of the undersigned organizations, coalitions, and individuals as a matter of record into the proceedings of the UN 2023 Water Conference and in particular, the Interactive Dialog 3 on Water for Climate Resilience and the Environment.

> We, the undersigned, urge UN staff, UN-Water members, partners and participants, national and local governments, and civil society organizations to declare support for and intentional focus for protecting natural water systems in addition to the laudable goal of bringing much needed infrastructure to provide clean water and sanitation to people.

We gather here for this historic opportunity to protect water around the world and to uphold the basic human right to clean and abundant water for all of humankind. We applaud everyone here for their work to protect Earth's most precious resource. We recognize that without safe, abundant, clean, and accessible water that is identified in United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 6, the other United Nations Sustainable Development Goals will not be achievable. Water is Life. And all life depends on clean water.

We support efforts discussed here at the UN Water Conference and around the world to improve sanitation and water access, and other efforts to ensure the human right to clean water is upheld and strengthened for everyone. We ask the UN to also consider declaring that water for nature is a human right as well, particularly for river-dependent, coastal, and island communities. For many communities and peoples, pollution, habitat loss, dams, and water diversions amount to loss of traditional food sources such as fish and freshwater plants.

When we consider all the ways that people, plants, and animals rely on abundant, clean, and accessible water, we understand that intact, healthy, natural water systems readily provide these services for us in many ways. And throughout the millennia of human history, humans and the ecosystems in which they live have developed adaptations, cultural pillars, spiritual connections, sustenance, and a symbiotic relationship with (and reliance on) functioning and healthy natural

water systems, including: snow pack, glaciers, streams, rivers, wetlands, transitional waters, groundwater, lakes, estuaries, coasts, marine waters, and open oceans.

These natural water systems provide the basis for thriving ecosystems that support biodiversity, fisheries, human drinking water needs, traditional harvest practices of Indigenous peoples and rural communities, cultural and spiritual traditions and values, wildlife habitat, and most pressing: climate control. A functioning and healthy natural water system provides services for humans, plants, animals, and the climate, every day. When these systems are impacted or destroyed due to pollution, habitat damage, water withdrawals, watercourse alterations, fossil fuel extraction, mining waste, development, and impacts of the climate crisis, biodiversity and water-dependent communities suffer, as does the ability of the Earth to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis. Restoration of degraded water habitat can restore some lost functions and we should wholeheartedly support it, but true restoration is time-consuming and expensive. In contrast, these ecosystem services, when protected and/or utilized sustainably, provide a buffer against the need for additional investment and infrastructure, which otherwise degrades additional water habitat and fuels more climate change.

Examples of natural water systems that provide immense benefits but that are now under threat include:

1. Free-flowing rivers with enough flow, and natural lakes with enough water, for maintaining healthy natural water cycles, ecosystems, and fish migration.
2. Spring-fed waters, interconnected aquifers, and high mountain ecosystems that store and release clean fresh water.
3. Wetlands and estuaries that serve as nurseries and water purification systems for aquatic and terrestrial life.
4. Coral reef ecosystems that support thriving diverse food webs and support island people and quite literally the land they live on.
5. Mangroves that act as natural defense systems, protecting coastal communities from storm surges, also serving as a source of food for thousands of species and vital forests for carbon capture and sequestration.
6. Coastlines, bays and estuaries that provide Indigenous and sustainable artisanal fishing, thereby protecting cultural values, livelihoods and providing sustenance for coastal communities while nurturing the open ocean.

These natural water systems have historically provided freely available vital services, but are under severe human-influenced threat from climate change, fossil fuel and mineral exploitation, pollution, shoreline development, dams, water withdrawals and diversions, and more.

Specific causes of increasing losses to natural water systems include:

1. Fossil fuels (direct pollution from extraction, refining, transport and combustion; and indirect impacts from greenhouse gasses and climate change)
2. Mining (toxic tailings, polluted aquifers, and destruction of habitat)
3. Dams (blocked and altered flows, blocked sediment transport, blocked and altered fish passage, water quality impacts, greenhouse gas emissions)

4. Water withdrawals and diversions (reduced water in rivers, polluted return flows)
5. Habitat loss (loss of flood plains, riparian habitat, coastal vegetation, sedimentation)
6. Pollution (human waste, nutrients, temperature/heating, toxic chemicals, persistent organic pollutants, petroleum spills and leaks, plastic pollution)
7. Introduction and spread of invasive species
8. Climate impacts (rising water temperatures, altered precipitation, droughts, floods, storms)

When we analyze the interactive dialogs, past water development reports, and other materials provided in conjunction with UN-Water we see that water for nature and the environment is given honorable mention, but we find few specifics and the human connection is rarely emphasized. As such, we urge attendees, members and partners of UN-Water to set expanded plans, targets, and commitments, and to implement robust measures to protect water for nature, water for climate, water for Indigenous peoples, and water for water-dependent communities by protecting instream flows, habitat, water quantity and access, water quality and the natural systems that preserve these essential aspects. In the many cases where water systems have been severely degraded, we call for restoration and rehabilitation of the natural waterways in a manner that restores their function as natural water carriers instead of resorting to pipes and canals.

We submit that these measures should be every bit as visionary, robust, and well-resourced as those programs to ensure sanitation and safe access to drinking water, and water for development and commerce. These investments will repay themselves many times over, and support the attainment of all other UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Specific water protection projects, which should, whenever possible, implement nature-based solutions and always in harmony with Indigenous and community rights, may include, but are not limited to:

1. Riparian habitat protection for streams (i.e., floodplain protection, buffers)
2. Pollution control (e.g., water treatment, restrictions on chemicals and products with dangerous chemicals, green stormwater infrastructure, livestock exclusion)
3. Restoration (e.g., planting native vegetation, restoring flows, etc.)
4. Removal of harmful dams
5. Overhauling environmental water transactions and allocations to permanently restore instream flows.
6. Improved implementation and enforcement of existing laws and regulations

Another critically important aspect of water protection is local determination. Indigenous peoples and local water-dependent communities must be empowered to participate and to make decisions impacting their natural water systems and habitat. Free, prior and informed consent means more than providing information about a project or allowing a seat at the table; it means true empowerment and the ability to say no to development, habitat destruction, and loss of water resources. Nowhere is this more important than in the rights of Indigenous people who have been the original stewards of natural water systems and currently steward 80% of the

world's remaining biodiversity. These rights are affirmed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Including, empowering and valuing the wisdom of the people most affected in the governance and management of our natural water systems, not only avoids violating their rights, but also results in the best decisions for the waters on which we all depend. This is not just about doing the right thing ethically; it is the ONLY way to make the correct decisions and to address the current water crisis together.

We encourage the parties of UN-Water to move forward with discussions, agreements, investments and commitments to make these and other important water protections a reality.

Respectfully submitted,

International
GegenStroemung - CounterCurrent, Germany
International Rivers, USA
Journalists for Human Rights, North Macedonia
Ríos to Rivers, USA
Rivers without Boundaries
Save the Tigris Foundation, Netherlands
The Center for Oceanic Awareness, Research, and Education (COARE), USA
Waterkeeper Alliance, USA
Women Engage for a Common Future, Germany

North America (USA and Canada)
Alamosa Riverkeeper,USA
Anacostia Riverkeeper, USA
Atchafalaya Basinkeeper, USA
Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper,United States of America
Bayou City Waterkeeper, USA
Bitterroot River Protection Association, aWaterkeeper Alliance Affiliate, USA
Black Warrior Riverkeeper, USA
Broad Riverkeeper, USA
Cahaba Riverkeeper, USA
Choctawhatchee Riverkeeper, USA
Choptank Riverkeeper, USA
Collier County Waterkeeper, USA
Friends of the Earth - US, USA
Great Basin Waterkeeper, USA
Gunpowder RIVERKEEPER , USA
Hackensack Riverkeeper, USA
Haw River Assembly, USA
Hudson Riverkeeper, USA
Hurricane Creekkeeper, USA

Kissimmee Waterkeeper, USA
Lake Erie Waterkeeper, USA
Living Rivers & Colorado Riverkeeper, USA
North Sound Waterkeeper, USA
Free Flowing Rivers Lab at Northern Arizona University, USA
NY/NJ Baykeeper, USA
Peconic Baykeeper, USA
Puget Soundkeeper, USA
Rio Grande Waterkeeper, USA
Russian Riverkeeper, USA
San Diego Coastkeeper, USA
Save the Sound, USA
Savannah Riverkeeper, USA
Seneca Lake Guardian, A Waterkeeper Alliance Affiliate, USA
Spokane Riverkeeper, USA
Suncoast Waterkeeper, USA
Tennessee Riverkeeper, USA
Three Rivers Waterkeeper, USA
Tualatin Riverkeepers, USA
Twin Harbors Waterkeeper, USA
Upper Coosa Riverkeeper, USA
Waccamaw Riverkeeper, USA
Water Climate Trust, USA
Waterkeepers Chesapeake, USA
White Oak Waterkeeper, USA
Winyah Rivers Alliance, USA

Latin America
Reacción Climática, Bolivia
Guanabara Baykeeper, Brasil
Futaleufu Riverkeeper , Chile
Maule Itata Coastkeeper, Chile
Rio Cravo Sur Waterkeeper, COLOMBIA
Fundación Guardaguas de Ecosistemas Marinos y Costeros Bocas de Ceniza / Bocas de Ceniza Waterkeeper, Colombia
MARBE SA, Costa Rica
ARCA/FANCA, Costa Rica
Hidrobag Costa Rica, Costa Rica
Guayallabamba Waterkeeper, Ecuador
Alianza de Derecho Ambiental y Agua, Guatemala
Tijuana Waterkeeper, Mexico
SARAR Transformación SC, México
Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense (AIDA), México
Centro Regional de Capacitación en Cuencas (CRCC) , México

Los Cabos Coastkeeper, A. C. México
Consejjo Ciudadano por el Agua de Yucatán, México
Redes de Agua México, México
CEAMSO, Paraguay
Rio Mapacho Waterkeeper, Perú

Small Island Developing States
Bimini Coastal Waterkeeper, The Bahamas
Grand Bahama Coastal Waterkeeper, The Bahamas
Waterkeepers Bahamas, The Bahamas

Australia and Oceania
Hunter Waterkeeper Inc., Australia
Yarra Riverkeeper, Australia
Werribee River Association, Australia
The Waterways Network, Australia
Port Phillip Baykeeper, Australia

Africa
Women Environmental Programme, Nigeria
Charles & Doosurgh Abaagu Foundation (CDAF), Nigeria
COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE INITIATIVE-(CERI), Nigeria
Bargny Coast Waterkeeper, Sénégal
Bargny Coast Waterkeeper, Sénégal
HANN BAYKEEPER, SÉNÉGAL
Kyoga-Nile waterkeeper, Uganda
Kazinga Channel Waterkeeper, Uganda

Asia
Khowai River Waterkeeper, Bangladesh
Waterkeepers Bangladesh, Bangladesh
Surma River Waterkeeper, Bangladesh
Tonle Sap Lake Waterkeeper, Cambodia
Qiantang River Waterkeeper, China
East Kali River Waterkeeper, India
Bagmati River Waterkeeper, Nepal
Karnali River Waterkeeper, Nepal
Tuul River Waterkeeper, Mongolia
The ChiangKhong Conservation group, a Waterkeeper Affiliate, Thailand

Middle East
Jordan River Waterkeeper, Israel

Jordan River Waterkeeper, Jordan
Jordan River Waterkeeper, Palestine
Waterkeepers Iraq Organization, Iraq
Humat Dijlah, Iraq

Europe
Soroptimist International, United Kingdom
London Waterkeeper, , United Kingdom
Älvräddarnas Waterkeeper, Sweden