

THE AGE OF WATER

A FILM BY ISABEL ALCÁNTARA ATALAYA AND ALFREDO ALCÁNTARA



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE





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Film Summary



When three children die of leukemia in a rural Mexican community, two mothers partner with a scientist to investigate their water supply. Their discovery of dangerous radioactivity leads to community backlash and government denial, revealing how deep aquifers harbor ancient nuclear traces from the last ice age.

Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and is designed for people who want to use *The Age of Water* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. Be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

A NOTE TO FACILITATORS

Dear POV Community,

We are so glad you have chosen to facilitate a discussion inspired by the film *The Age of Water*. Before you facilitate, please prepare yourself for the conversation, as this film invites you and your community to discuss experiences of rural communities in Mexico, environmental justice, activism, mental and emotional health, and U.S. political landscapes. These conversations require learning truths about society, culture, and political motivations that typically have not been taught in schools. We urge you, as a facilitator, to take the necessary steps to ensure that you are prepared to guide a conversation that prioritizes the well-being and safety of Latinx communities, women advocates, and youth in your community. Importantly, this film shares experiences through a lens of joy and resilience, rather than focusing on trauma, and we hope this guide will aid you in conversations that expand understanding while maximizing care, critical curiosity, transformation, and connection.

Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

Share Community Agreements

Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. Here is a model of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- Pass around sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- Allow time for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- Go around in a circle and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- Go around two to three times to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- Read the list aloud.
- Invite questions or revisions.
- Ask if all are satisfied with the list.

Agricultural Dumping

The practice of exporting agricultural products to another country at prices below the cost of production or below the price in the exporter's own domestic market.

Aquifer

An underground layer of permeable rock, sediment, or soil that stores and transmits water. In semi-arid regions like Guanajuato, aquifers are often divided into shallow, renewable layers and deep, ancient reserves.

Arsenic

A naturally occurring element that can leach into groundwater from rock formations. Long-term ingestion is linked to cancers, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic illnesses.

Commodity Crops

These are crops that are grown primarily for large-scale sale and trade, rather than for direct consumption on the farm or for local subsistence.

Community Science

A collaborative approach where local residents and scientists work together to design research, gather data, and analyze results. In La Cantera, this involved residents partnering with UNAM scientists to test for water contamination.

Environmental Justice

A rights-based, multidisciplinary framework that centers on the fair treatment and meaningful participation of all people, particularly marginalized communities, in environmental decision-making. It encompasses three key aspects:

- **Substantive justice-** Ensuring access to a safe, healthy, and ecologically balanced environment, including clean water and air.
- **Procedural justice-** Guaranteeing that affected populations have access to infor-

mation, opportunities to participate in decisions, and avenues to seek legal remedies.

- **Recognition justice-** Addressing structural inequalities by acknowledging and validating the identities, histories, and lived experiences of disadvantaged groups.

This approach aligns environmental protection with human rights and the rule of law, enabling communities like La Cantera to assert their right to clean water and hold authorities accountable.

Environmental Racism

The systemic placement of marginalized racial or ethnic communities in proximity to environmental hazards—such as toxic waste sites, polluted air or water, and other sources of environmental harm—while they are denied equal access to environmental benefits like clean water, green space, or effective environmental regulation and enforcement.

Fluoride

A mineral naturally present in groundwater, especially in volcanic regions. In small amounts, it supports dental health, but chronic high exposure causes dental and skeletal fluorosis.

Fossil Water

Ancient groundwater trapped in aquifers—sometimes sealed by impermeable rock—for thousands to tens of thousands of years, often dating back to the last Ice Age. Because it formed under very different climatic conditions

and receives little to no modern recharge, it is effectively nonrenewable. Pumping fossil water is more like mining a finite resource than drawing from a replenishing supply.

Hydrological Cycle

The continuous movement of water between the Earth's surface, atmosphere, and subsurface. This cycle includes processes such as evaporation, condensation, precipitation, infiltration, and runoff. In Guanajuato, the cycle has been disrupted by overextraction, which removes groundwater faster than it can be replenished, breaking the balance between recharge and use.

MAYOYE

A grassroots organization in La Cantera, Guanajuato, and founded by two mothers, Nely Baeza and Elia Zarazua, after their daughters—Marifer, Yoselyn, and Yessica—died from acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Named from the girls' initials, the group formed after dis-

covering, with guidance from hydrogeologist Dr. Adrián Ortega, dangerous levels of radioactivity in the local aquifer, linked to the overuse of ancient groundwater for industrial farming. Since then, MAYOYE has demanded independent water testing, transparency, and government accountability. Despite pushback from authorities and divisions within the community, its founders continue to rally neighbors and shine a light on the severe health risks posed by contaminated water.

Overextraction

The removal of groundwater at rates faster than natural recharge. Overextraction lowers water tables, dries up springs, causes land subsidence, and increases the risk of drawing in naturally occurring contaminants like arsenic, fluoride, and radon.

Overfarming (Overcultivation)

The term used to describe the practice of using the same land intensively for agriculture without allowing time for the soil to recover its nutrients.

Radon

A radioactive gas produced by the natural decay of uranium in certain rocks, including volcanic formations common in Guanajuato. It can dissolve into groundwater and pose serious health risks when consumed or inhaled.

Participants

Elia Zarazua

A kindergarten teacher in La Cantera who lost her student, Yoselyn, to acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Elia co-founded the grassroots group MAYOYE—named for three girls who died from the disease—to seek answers and justice. She organized community memorials, challenged local officials, and collaborated with scientists to investigate water contamination, even resigning from her teaching position when ordered not to speak about the health crisis.

Nely Baeza

A mother from La Cantera whose daughter, Marifer, died of leukemia. Nely joined forces with Elia to form MAYOYE, driven by her own grief and a determination to prevent more deaths. She participated in protests, confronted municipal authorities, and helped secure independent testing of the town's water.

Dr. Adrián Ortega Guerrero

A hydrogeologist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico who partnered with MAYOYE to study environmental contamination in La Cantera. His team detected high levels of radon, arsenic, and fluoride in the local water supply, linking them to overextraction of ancient groundwater. He served as both a scientific authority and an ally to the community's organizing efforts.

Andrea Cerami

A representative from the Mexican Center for Environmental Rights who advised MAYOYE on safety, legal strategy, and public communication. They counseled the group on how to navigate public attacks and government pushback, emphasizing collective safety and resilience in their activism.

Humberto Navarro

Deputy for the National Water Commission in Guanajuato. Navarro appears in the film as a government official addressing concerns about La Cantera's water quality. He responds to contamination findings and offers the agency's position on the safety of the municipal supply.

Key Issues

The Age of Water is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Water as a human right and environmental justice
- Groundwater overextraction and depletion of aquifers
- Women's leadership in movement-building
- Public health impacts of water contamination
- Grassroots activism and community science
- Government accountability and institutional denial
- Industrial agriculture and its effects on water resources

Background Information

Women's Rights and Roles in Mexico: From Suffrage to Environmental Justice

The story of women's rights in Mexico is one of gradual but hard-fought transformation. In the early twentieth century, women's roles were largely confined to the domestic sphere, yet moments of national crisis expanded their participation. During the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), women stepped into public life as *soldaderas*, nurses, and organizers, blurring the boundaries between private caregiving and civic duty. Though the 1917 Constitution introduced progressive labor and education reforms, women were denied political equality. Still, women's activism persisted: from the First Feminist Congress in Yucatán in 1916 to mid-century campaigns for suffrage, women consistently pressed the state to acknowledge their rights.

That acknowledgment arrived in 1953, when Mexican women finally won the right to vote and hold national office. This legal recognition of “full citizenship” marked a turning point, yet formal equality did not immediately translate into protection from violence, access to health care, or participation in decision-making. From the 1970s onward, feminist movements in Mexico expanded the struggle beyond the ballot box, demanding reproductive rights, freedom from gender-based violence, and visibility in public institutions. Women organized grassroots collectives and NGOs, bridging the gap between private struggles in the home and broader demands for justice.

The Age of Water situates itself in this longer history of women’s activism. In La Cantera, mothers and teachers transform their grief into collective action when a cluster of childhood leukemia cases devastates the community. They stepped into leadership not because they sought public office, but because the state failed to protect their children. They break into city council meetings, confront governors and water authorities, and even learn to use technical instruments to monitor groundwater. In doing so, they embody the trajectory of Mexican women who have historically moved from domestic responsibilities into civic leadership when survival demanded it.

The resistance they face such as mockery as “gossiping ladies,” threats from neighbors, and pressure from authorities to remain silent echoes the obstacles women have encountered throughout Mexico’s struggle for equality. Yet, just as earlier generations of feminists insisted that caregiving and citizenship are inseparable, the women of La Cantera insist that safeguarding children’s health is a political right, not a private burden. Their group extends Mexico’s feminist legacy into the realm of environmental justice, demonstrating how women continue to redefine their roles as protectors of both family and community.

Water and Development in Guanajuato

The state of Guanajuato occupies a central place in Mexico's agricultural history, lying in the fertile Bajío region once known as the country's "granary." In the colonial era, abundant springs, seasonal rivers, and shallow aquifers supported orchards, grains, and vegetables. Irrigation infrastructure, including diversion channels and storage ponds, was controlled largely by haciendas, concentrating water rights in elite hands. After the Mexican Revolution, the *ejido* land reform redistributed agricultural lands to rural communities, but access to the most productive irrigation systems still favored medium and large producers. By the mid-20th century, deep well technology, motorized pumps, and large dams enabled a major transformation: surface water was increasingly supplanted by groundwater as the primary source of irrigation, allowing for year-round cultivation in what is naturally a semi-arid climate.

This shift intensified with the Green Revolution of the 1950s through the 1970s, when state agencies promoted hybrid seeds, synthetic fertilizers, and modern irrigation systems to increase yields. While productivity rose, these innovations were accompanied by soaring water demand, particularly for crops like alfalfa that require substantial irrigation. The national agricultural policy of this era tied rural modernization to groundwater extraction, with government subsidies for pumping equipment and electricity lowering the costs for large-scale users. This laid the groundwork for chronic overdraft of the aquifers, as extraction far outpaced natural recharge. By the 1980s, falling water tables and the drying of historic springs signaled the onset of an ecological tipping point.

The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 marked another critical turn. Guanajuato's agricultural sector pivoted toward high-value export crops such as broccoli, lettuce, and strawberries, cultivated year-round for markets in the United States, Canada, and Europe. These crops are essentially “virtual water” exports, each shipment representing the permanent removal of groundwater from the basin. The region's strategic location and road infrastructure made it a hub for agro-industrial logistics, enabling produce to reach the U.S. border in under 12 hours. However, this integration into global supply chains came at the cost of accelerating aquifer depletion, with extraction volumes now measured in the hundreds of millions of cubic meters annually and wells drilled to depths exceeding 200 meters.

Overextraction, Fossil Water, and Contamination

Groundwater in Guanajuato is a product of thousands of years of hydrological cycling. Rainfall infiltrates through soils and rock layers, slowly replenishing the aquifers. In their natural state, these reserves contain a mix of “younger” water, recharged over decades or centuries, and “fossil water” that infiltrated millennia ago. Studies using isotopic dating methods, such as carbon-13 and carbon-14 analysis, have shown that much of the deep groundwater in Guanajuato is between 5,000 and 35,000 years old, originating during the last Ice Age. This ancient water is effectively nonrenewable within human timeframes: once pumped, it will not be replaced for thousands of years. The overextraction that began in the mid-20th century has already depleted the younger, renewable fraction, forcing communities and industries to rely almost entirely on fossil water.

The chemistry of deep fossil water differs significantly from that of shallow reserves. Prolonged contact with volcanic rock formations has infused it with elevated concentrations of naturally occurring contaminants such as fluoride, arsenic, and radioactive elements, including uranium decay products like radon gas. Under natural conditions, these elements remain in balance within the geologic strata. However, large-scale pumping changes subsurface pressures and water movement, creating conditions for contaminants to migrate into production wells. Hydrogeological studies have linked excessive drawdown to increased mobilization of radon, which dissolves into water and cannot be removed by conventional treatment methods. This contamination is not evenly distributed but occurs in clusters where specific geologic formations intersect with overdrawn aquifers.

The health risks associated with these contaminants are well-documented. Chronic exposure to arsenic can lead to skin lesions, cancers, and cardiovascular diseases. Fluoride, while beneficial at trace levels, causes dental and skeletal fluorosis in excess, leading to pain, mobility impairment, and tooth loss. Radon, as a radioactive gas, presents a potent carcinogenic hazard, with ingestion linked to stomach cancers and inhalation increasing lung cancer risk. In regions of Guanajuato, recorded levels of these substances in drinking water exceed both national and World Health Organization safety thresholds. The cumulative health burden manifests over decades, with vulnerable populations such as children bearing the heaviest impacts due to their higher water intake relative to body weight and developmental sensitivity to neurotoxins.

Governance and Policy Challenges

Mexico's legal framework for water management, particularly the 1992 National Water Law, is regarded internationally as robust in scope. It established the National Water Commission as the central authority for issuing concessions that specify extraction volumes, durations, and intended uses. In theory, this system enables sustainable allocation through data-driven planning. However, enforcement has been inconsistent, and the law's market-oriented provisions have facilitated the consolidation of water rights among the most economically powerful users. Concessions can be leased or sold, allowing agribusiness and industry to accumulate significant extraction volumes, often beyond sustainable limits.

In Guanajuato, governance is further complicated by multi-level jurisdiction. State agencies like the State Water Commission and regional basin councils under the Lerma Chapala framework are tasked with localized management, but these institutions often lack the political autonomy or resources to impose restrictions on large water users. Local groundwater councils, intended as participatory forums, have in many cases been dominated by representatives of commercial agriculture and industry, limiting their responsiveness to rural or small-scale users. This imbalance is exacerbated by the political economy of water: authorities face pressure to maintain supplies for export agriculture and industrial investors, even when scientific evidence calls for reductions in extraction to preserve aquifer health.

Research on Mexico's water sector has identified a persistent implementation gap between the country's laws and their real-world enforcement. While regulations mandate environmental flow protections and set quality standards for drinking water, monitoring is sporadic, data transparency is limited, and sanctions for noncompliance are rarely applied to influential actors. In the case of Guanajuato, where official data from previous decades estimated that 97 percent of total water use came from groundwater, current reliance is effectively total in many municipalities, as springs, rivers, and other surface sources have dried or become unusable. Policy decisions that prioritize short-term economic gain over long-term sustainability risk pushing the region into irreversible hydrological collapse with widespread social and economic consequences.

Cultural and Ecological Heritage of Water

For centuries, water in Guanajuato has been central not only to economic life but also to cultural identity. Oral histories recall abundant springs feeding orchards, wetlands, and seasonal crops, as well as traditional foods such as quelites, wild greens gathered during the rainy season. In local mythology, springs and wells are guarded by *El Chan*, a spirit figure rooted in Mesoamerican cosmology who rewards respect and punishes neglect. These beliefs historically reinforced communal norms of stewardship, linking environmental care with spiritual and moral order. The cultural meaning of water was embedded in festivals, agricultural rituals, and collective maintenance of irrigation works.

Ecologically, the loss of natural springs marks a profound rupture. These springs supported riparian habitats, moderated local climates, and recharged shallow aquifers. Their disappearance underlines the interconnectedness of hydrological and ecological systems: overextraction not only depletes water storage but also collapses the ecosystems that depend on it. In many rural communities, the sensory qualities of water, its clarity, taste, and coolness were part of daily experience and identity. The shift to deep well water, often mineral-laden and altered in taste, has eroded both ecological diversity and cultural continuity.

The erosion of water heritage is paralleled by transformations in land use and social structure. Communal irrigation networks have been replaced or bypassed by privately owned wells serving commercial farms and factories. This privatization has weakened traditional governance systems that once mediated access and ensured equitable distribution. As a result, water is increasingly perceived not as a shared trust but as an economic commodity, alienating communities from a resource that historically sustained both their livelihoods and their cultural life. Preserving and restoring Guanajuato's water heritage now requires not only technical interventions but also the revitalization of cultural practices and governance models that recognize water as a living link between past, present, and future.

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DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Prompt One: Starting The Conversation

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- What moments or images in the film stayed with you the most?
- Whose voices stood out, and why?
- How did the film challenge or affirm your understanding of water rights?
- Which emotions came up for you while watching, and what sparked them?
- How does the story of La Cantera connect to other struggles for water justice you've seen or heard about?

PROMPT TWO: Water, Power, and Injustice

- How does the film frame water as a human right, and how is that right denied in La Cantera?
- What examples of environmental racism do you see in the community's experiences?

- How do gender roles, particularly the leadership of mothers, shape the response to the crisis?
- What systemic barriers prevent equitable access to safe drinking water?
- How do local politics and economic interests influence water distribution and safety?

Facilitator Note: Draw from feminist political ecology to highlight how women's care work, community organizing, and local ecological knowledge are often undervalued yet essential in environmental justice movements.

PROMPT THREE: Climate Crisis and Resource Extraction

- How is the hydrological cycle disrupted in Guanajuato, and what does that mean for water availability?
- What connections do you see between overextraction, contamination, and climate change?
- How does global demand for export crops contribute to local water scarcity?
- What other regions face similar climate-related water challenges?
- What role could rainwater harvesting or other nature-based solutions play in reducing stress on aquifers?

Facilitator Note: Introduce the UN's *Rain Nests* and other rainwater harvesting initiatives as real-world examples. Invite participants to brainstorm local adaptations.

PROMPT FOUR: Healing, Resistance, and the Power of Community

- How does grief catalyze collective action in the film?
- What strategies do the women of MAYOYE use to advocate for their community?
- How does collaboration between residents and scientists strengthen their demands?
- What role do cultural memory, altars, or rituals play in sustaining resistance?
- How can communities remain united when external pressures and internal divisions emerge?

PROMPT FIVE: Protecting the Next Generation

- How does the film center on children's health as a driving force for activism?
- What are the short- and long-term impacts of contaminated water on young people?
- What obligations do governments have to protect children from environmental harm?

- How can local and scientific knowledge combine to ensure safer futures for children?
- How might gendered caregiving roles affect advocacy for children's environmental health?

PROMPT SIX: Truth in the Tap — Science, Data, and Public Knowledge

- How did community-led research challenge the official narrative about water safety?
- Why might institutions resist or dismiss scientific findings?
- How does access to accurate, transparent data impact environmental justice struggles?
- What responsibilities do scientists have when their research exposes public health risks?
- How can communities use science as a shared journey toward solutions?

OPENING/CLOSING ACTIVITY

Begin your discussion by inviting participants to reflect on their personal connections to water. Provide each person with a sheet of paper and colored pens or pencils. Ask them to draw a simple “water map” of their life, noting places, bodies of water, or water-related memories that have shaped them—this could include rivers, lakes, community wells, taps at home, or even droughts or floods they’ve experienced.

- After 5–7 minutes of drawing, invite participants to share one element from their map with a partner or small group.
- Prompt them to consider: *How has water shaped your sense of safety, community, and identity? How have you seen access to clean water impact health and daily life?* This activity encourages personal connection before diving into the film’s themes, helping participants ground the discussion in lived experiences.

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they’ve experienced and move from dialogue to potential action, you may want to choose one of these questions:

- How has the film shifted your understanding of the relationship between water, environmental justice, and public health?
- What resonated most deeply for you—the personal stories, the scientific findings, the activism, or the resistance from authorities—and why?
- If you could send one message from this film to policymakers or community leaders, what would it be?

TAKING ACTION

Support Community-Led Water Monitoring – Volunteer with or donate to grassroots organizations that train residents to collect and share water quality data, ensuring vulnerable communities have a voice in protecting local water sources.

Examples: [Global Water Watch](#) , [Waterkeeper Alliance](#) (international network).

- Advocate for Environmental Justice Policies – Write to local and national representatives urging investment in public water infrastructure, equitable access to clean water, and protections against industrial over-extraction and contamination.

Examples: [Clean Water Action](#)

- Build Coalitions for Public Water Management – Join with labor unions, faith-based groups, and environmental organizations to oppose harmful water privatization and promote community-centered, publicly managed solutions.

Examples: [End Water Poverty](#)

Resources

Water Justice & Community Action

- **Clean Water Action** – U.S.-based grassroots organization advocating for clean, safe, and affordable water, environmental justice, and public health protections through community organizing and policy change. <https://cleanwater.org/>
- **US Water Alliance – Water Equity Network** – Coalition of U.S. cities and water utilities ensuring all communities have safe, affordable water and addressing inequities in water management and infrastructure. <https://uswateralliance.org/programs/water-equity-network/>
- **Global Water Watch** – International network supporting community-based water quality monitoring, training volunteers in water testing, and promoting stewardship in vulnerable communities worldwide. <https://www.globalwaterwatch.earth/>
- **United Nations – Water** – The UN's hub for global water issues, offering research, policy guidance,

and coordination toward Sustainable Development Goal 6: clean water and sanitation for all. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/water>

Environmental & Climate Justice

- **International Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN)** – Alliance of Indigenous Peoples protecting the sacredness of Earth, promoting sustainable livelihoods, and advocating for climate and water justice across Turtle Island and globally. <https://www.ienearth.org/>
- **The Chisholm Legacy Project** – Resource hub for Black climate justice leadership, supporting community-driven environmental solutions through training, policy advocacy, and capacity building. <https://thechisholmlegacyproject.org/>
- **Global Witness** – International NGO investigating and exposing environmental and human rights abuses, including corruption and exploitation of natural resources like water. <https://globalwitness.org/en/>

Resources (cont.)

- **World Resources Institute (WRI)** – Global research organization improving water security, combating climate change, and advancing sustainable development through data-driven policy solutions. <https://www.wri.org/>

clean water access as a moral issue. <https://greenfaith.org/>

Faith- and Women-Led Environmental Leadership

- **Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)** – Founded in 1915, this women-led organization unites women globally to advance peace, justice, disarmament, and environmental rights, including water justice. <https://www.wilpf.org/>
- **Women's Earth Alliance (WEA)** – Global network partnering with grassroots, women-led initiatives to protect the environment, end climate injustice, and strengthen community water systems. <https://womensearthalliance.org/>
- **GreenFaith** – International, interfaith environmental organization mobilizing people of all religions to protect the Earth, address climate change, and ensure

Teaching Guide

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Participants will understand the connections between environmental justice, public health, environmental racism and community activism in the context of water contamination. They will be able to analyze local and global water justice issues, identify key stakeholders, and develop action-oriented solutions inspired by *The Age of Water*.

MATERIALS

- CHART PAPER AND MARKERS
- NOTECARDS OR STICKY NOTES
- COPIES OF LOCAL WATER QUALITY REPORTS OR FACT SHEETS
- PRINTOUTS OR LINKS TO RESOURCES FROM *HUMAN RIGHTS TO WATER AND SANITATION ADVOCACY TOOLKIT* AND THE LISTED RESOURCES SECTION

TIME REQUIRED

90 MINUTES

Essential Questions

- How does access to clean, safe water intersect with human rights, environmental justice, racism, and public health?
- What structural and policy factors contribute to water contamination in vulnerable communities?
- How can community members—especially women and youth—lead effective water monitoring, advocacy, and policy change?
- What actions can we take locally to prevent or address water contamination?

Activity

1. Connection – 10 minutes

After watching *The Age of Water*, participants sit in a circle. Each receives two notecards.

- On the first card (lined side), write: *What does water justice look, sound, and feel like in your community?*
- On the second card (blank side), write: *What questions do you have about water quality, policy, or advocacy?*

Cards are placed in the center for the group to view. Participants walk around, reading the cards, and then share observations about common themes or differences.

2. Teaching Point – 10 minutes

Facilitator introduces and defines:

- **Environmental Justice** – ensuring all communities have equal protection from environmental harm.

Teaching Guide (cont.)

- **Environmental Racism:** a form of systemic racism where people of color and low-income communities are disproportionately burdened by exposure to pollution, hazardous waste, and environmental hazards. It involves deliberate and discriminatory policies, institutional decisions, and practices that lead to the placement of toxic waste facilities and polluting industries in communities of color, while also restricting their access to a clean and healthy environment.
- **Water Equity** – fair access to safe, affordable water regardless of income, race, or geography.
- **Community-Led Water Monitoring** – residents collecting water quality data to inform action.
- **Intersectionality** - the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, and the ways these identities create overlapping and interdependent systems and experiences of privilege or structural oppression.
- **Policy Advocacy** – engaging decision-makers to pass laws and policies that protect water rights.
- **Global-Local Linkages** – understanding how global water crises connect to local struggles.

3. Active Engagement – 20 minutes

Facilitator draws a three-column chart labeled:

Community-Led Monitoring | Policy Advocacy | Coalition Building

Using examples from the film:

- **Community-Led Monitoring:** Mothers in Mexico partnering with scientists to test water for radioactivity.
- **Policy Advocacy:** Demands to government agencies for acknowledgment and remediation.
- **Coalition Building:** Alliances with environmental justice groups and international advocates.

Teaching Guide (cont.)

Participants add examples from their own community knowledge or research.

4. Link – 5 minutes

Participants individually brainstorm activities or campaigns they could start or join to address water issues.

5. Workshop – 15 minutes

Each participant creates an action plan using chart paper:

- Define the water issue.
- Identify stakeholders (community, government, NGOs, faith groups).
- List possible actions (monitoring, public education, lobbying, coalition work).
- Resources needed (funding, volunteers, training, equipment).

6. Gallery Walk – 5 minutes

Post action plans around the room. Participants circulate, leaving sticky-note affirmations and suggestions on each plan.

7. Collective Reflection – 20 minutes

Facilitator leads discussion:

1. How has the film changed how you think about water as a human right?
2. What steps can you take in the next month to support water justice locally?
3. What partnerships or coalitions could strengthen your work?
4. In what ways is environmental justice an intersectional and global issue?

8. Final Circle – 5 minutes

Participants complete the sentence: *"I commit to water justice that looks, feels, and sounds like..."*

Credits & Acknowledgments



About the Author, **Destinee Bates**

Destinee Bates is a cultural communicator, public theologian, and media strategist whose work sits at the intersection of faith, justice, and environmental ethics. A graduate of Union Theological Seminary's Master of Divinity program, she identifies as an ecowomanist, a theological and ethical approach articulated by scholar Melanie L. Harris that centers the environmental justice perspectives of women of African descent and links social justice to earth justice.

Her faith community was rooted in St. Ambrose Episcopal Church, located in Raleigh's Rochester Heights Historic District, a post-World War II neighborhood and national historic district situated one and a half miles southeast of downtown. This historically Black community was built in a floodplain where the city discharged raw sewage and

dumped waste for over seventy years. Through St. Ambrose, Bates joined cleanup efforts like the Big Sweep and partnered with Partners for Environmental Justice on community education projects. These early experiences grounded her conviction that environmental justice is both a spiritual mandate and a structural necessity.

Her work has taken her from grassroots organizing to the global stage, serving as a U.N. Climate Delegate for the Episcopal Church at COP26 and COP28. She has facilitated public programming and strategic communications for projects at the nexus of racial justice, climate action, and narrative change. In every setting, from faith communities to secular advocacy spaces, Bates emphasizes intentional framing and accessible language to move audiences from reflection to meaningful action.

Bates is drawn to *The Age of Water* for its powerful portrayal of water as both a sacred source of life and a contested site of systemic harm. Guided by ecowomanist principles, she approaches this work with a prophetic commitment to dismantling environmental injustice, honoring the earth as sacred, and amplifying the leadership of women and frontline communities in shaping a just and sustainable future.

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THANKS TO THOSE WHO REVIEWED AND CONTRIBUTED TO THIS RESOURCE:

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