

## The plastic bag is not a harmless necessity

By Liz Godar

At first glance, a plastic bag seems merely a harmless, cheap method of carrying around your things. When they rip or become unnecessary, we carelessly dispose of them by whatever means are easiest. Sometimes we recycle them and feel good about ourselves for doing so. Yet is there something we are overlooking? Yes. While we all have grown up viewing plastic bags as a disposable necessity, the truth is that they are ecologically, economically, and socially destructive. And we, as a generation, are responsible.

Plastic bags are more than they appear. The consequences of this oversight are severe and at this point, no longer can be ignored. Plastic bags are made largely through petroleum, increasing the United States' already overwhelming dependency on foreign oil. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, we in the US use about 320 billion plastic bags and sacks each year.

Perhaps the worst effect is their catastrophic environmental consequences. Plastic bags account for 10% of the waste built up along the US shoreline and kill thousands of birds and marine animals each year, from seals to turtles to dolphins. These bags break down into even more toxic petro-polymers that then work their way into our food system. Not only are billions of these soon-to-be-toxic waste bags floating around in our waterways and oceans, but they also will take 500 years to disappear completely.

While plastic bags are recyclable, fewer than 1% actually are recycled. Even so, the recycling process is extremely economically insensitive. According to the San Francisco Department of

the Environment, processing and recycling a ton of plastic bags costs about \$4,000, and the new recycled material will then be sold on the commodities market for the pathetic sum of \$32.

For these reasons, cities and entire countries are taking measures to weed out this environmental plague. Israel, Bangladesh and Botswana have banned the bag. Ireland has implemented a tax on plastic bags, thus decreasing their use by 90%. China has banned free plastic bags and Canada, Taiwan and Singapore are all working for similar goals. Paris, London and many other European cities are implementing such regulations. Last year, San Francisco became the first US city to begin to prohibit the plastic bag and is hoping to eliminate it by 2010. Cities all over the country—including Boston, Oakland, Portland, Phoenix and Seattle—are joining in this wave of environmental decency.

While reusable bags are more prevalent and have become trendy, I have asked employees of businesses that flaunt "Go Green" on their exteriors what they are doing to support the slogan. I have been disappointed to see the panic as they grope for a satisfactory response. We need to make "Go Green" more than a popular marketing catchphrase.

Let's put St. Louis on the map as the most environmentally aware city of the Midwest. The next time a grocery store employee asks you, "Is plastic okay?" the correct answer is "no."

*Liz Godar, a junior at Villa Duchesne High School in St. Louis, belongs to the Interscholar Ecological Council made up of students and teachers who campaign to raise awareness about the consequences of plastic bags.*

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***The U.N. Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that 46,000 pieces of plastic litter—including bits of packaging, cigarette lighters, plastic bags, and diapers—are floating on every square mile of the oceans, a figure that has increased threefold since the 1960s. Fifteen Marine conservation groups estimate that more than a million seabirds and 100,000 mammals and sea turtles die globally each year by getting tangled in or ingesting plastics.***

## We All Live Downstream

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By Matt Rota

***Water Resources Program Director  
Gulf Restoration Network***

My first real experience with witnessing firsthand the power and might of the Mississippi River came in the summer of 1993. I grew up in Southern Illinois, and remember vividly the floods that came down the river that year. In a lot of ways it was surreal. I would drive across the river to St. Louis with my family to see the ever-rising waters. Thousands of people would gather under the Arch to "watch" the flood. But, as surreal as that was, my neighbors and family saw it as an immediate threat. The town next to (and down the bluff from) mine was Valmeyer, and there I spent time filling up sand bags to hold back flooding but all the sand bags were not enough. The levee broke above Valmeyer on August 1 and flooded the entire town. This demonstrated not only the might of the Mississippi, but

# Go with the Flow: Fleeing the Effects of Climate Change

By Molly Kammien

As we continue to see the effects of climate change on our planet, forced migration—a new phenomenon—is likely to become the greatest challenge nations will need to face together. Each year an increasing number of people are becoming “climate refugees” due to natural disasters and environmental change. While this type of migration is not new—people have moved during drought spells since the beginning of time—the current trend poses two challenges. First, the sheer number of climate change refugees is overwhelming. Estimates show that by 2050 we will see between 150-200 million climate refugees worldwide, more than four times the number of refugees and internally displaced people recognized by the UN Refugee Agency in 2008. Second, those forced to move often come from the rural areas in developing countries. These countries lack the infrastructure to support a growing urban population and the refugees cannot afford to move internationally.

As migration proceeds, changes in water systems are a primary concern. By 2020, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that nearly 1.5 billion people will be facing “water stress.” Because of the melting glaciers, numerous areas of the world will experience rising sea levels, extreme floods, dramatic changes in rainfall, and an increase in the number and severity of hurricanes. Already small island states, whose citizens make up 5% of the global population, are feeling the effects of water stress as their countries literally disappear beneath their feet. Leaders on islands like Carteret in Papua New Guinea and the Maldives are in the process of negotiating for land purchase on other mainland countries to move their entire populations.

Another highly vulnerable area for forced migration surrounds the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in Asia. This plateau with its adjoining glaciers serve as the source of Asia’s most important rivers. These rivers, in turn, provide nearly *half* of the world’s population with water. As a result of global warming, the rate of melting has increased to 7% annually,



**Flood victims flee in Eastern India**

according to the Chinese government. These changes will contribute to a short-term increase in severe flooding and sea level rise and a long-term crisis in water shortages throughout Asia. China especially will be affected by the loss of these glacial runoffs. They provide the majority of China’s southern population with water.

While migration caused by the melting Qinghai-Tibet Plateau has already begun, the number of climate change refugees fleeing to more stable areas will increase exponentially if the rate of melting continues. Many indigenous communities in the mega-delta regions will be displaced from their homes because of flooding, leaving behind their traditional lands, farming techniques, and culture.

In addition to Asia, other areas of the world are feeling the effects of changing water patterns. One long-term effect of glacier melts is drought, which will force heightened migration in the coming years. While drought

and desertification have traditionally been challenges in Africa, their occurrence and intensity will increase if glacier melts continue and water becomes less available. Worldwide, climate refugees fleeing drought-stricken areas leave behind crop loss, dried-up water sources, soil erosion, and failed industries as they search for water.

In South America, the Andean glaciers once present in five Latin American countries have now disappeared from Venezuela and are shrinking at a rate of 10% per decade. These glaciers serve as the main source of drinking water for the populous capital cities of Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru—and their disappearance could leave between 30-50 million people without water. While fresh water can be temporarily rerouted to the cities from the mountains, this method will not be sustainable as a long-term solution to water stress. In addition, it puts additional pressure on highland indigenous communities who depend on the water for farming.

The problem of climate change migration has thus far been largely ignored in terms of government policy and preparation. If forced climate change migration continues in the current direction, we are bound to see incredible political, economic, and social consequences. Conflict, health problems, violence, and loss of cultural identity could easily come about as a result.

So what should be done? Besides the obvious need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, governments also need to take solid action to prepare themselves for a sudden and drastic increase in the number of climate-change refugees. Proper infrastructure should be established in the cities for the influx.

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## ***Prayer and Reflection by Sheila Norris***

### ***Dancing in the Water of Life***

#### **Go with the Flow: Fleeing the Effects of Climate Change**

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There must be efficient ways for people to access potable water. Laws should be passed to protect the rights of the refugees, who are often lost in the system and subject to systemic prejudice. Governments also need to provide extra assistance to those living in poverty, people from island states, indigenous peoples who face the most immediate threat of displacement by preparing to accept large numbers of refugees from abroad.

Special attention must be paid to these marginalized groups, who have contributed the least to global warming but will feel the greatest effects. We share a moral imperative to protect their rights and prevent further damage to their environments.

*Molly Kammiem is a Boston College student, serving as a summer intern at the Loretto Community NGO office at the UN. Prior to beginning this internship, she spent a semester in Ghana, West Africa, serving in rural areas and studying Ghanaian culture.*

A sublime Sabbath liturgy unfolded this morning as I hiked up East Lake Creek Trail, a treasured High Country getaway location. How I am drawn to this familiar, unwallled outdoor cathedral rimmed by the still snow-covered, towering summits of the New York range. The silence here is deafening and deep, broken only by the background choir of cascading creek and solo birdsong. My wordless homilists today are two furry, four-legged friends who revel in this sacred space as wholeheartedly as do I.



Fluffin, a tightly wound King Charles spaniel, tentatively scampers down into the swollen creek only when thirsty, daintily lapping fresh, cold water while standing stock still. Meanwhile, Jesse, her faithful black Lab partner, who is much more free spirited and playful, charges eagerly into the water. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, the title of a book by Thomas Merton, instantly came to mind as I watched Jesse cavort and prance with wild abandon and delight in the shallow channels of Spring snowmelt run-off. How concretely these lively companions mirrored for me my own fluctuating life rhythms. Sometimes I choose to operate out of an isolated essence entrenched in the myth of separateness, only dabbling in reconnection to Source when in dire need. But then there are the graced moments when the centered self, grounded in Oneness, receives, participates in and shares with others this revitalizing Water of Life.



O Cosmic Creator: It seems that only global pandemics, international financial ruin and environmental crises have the power to rudely awaken us to the underlying reality of human interdependence and invisible connection. Indeed, in times of trial as well as when enthralled by the world of nature, we may begin to sense the Oneness of all that is. But it is in the ordinary in between moments that we need to be shaken up and drawn out of the delimiting, dualistic mindset that obscures unitive consciousness. O Great Spirit, our small stories are individual threads being woven into the larger tapestry of ongoing creation and the ultimate evolutionary return to You, our Source. May mindfulness and compassion inspire us to a deeper

inner ecology and awareness of our impact on the world of Spirit, on the other souls in our care. The life you gift us with is an unrepeatable web of purpose and meaning. Teach us trust that we may truly dance in the waters of this one, magnificent life.

***Sheila Norris resides in Denver. She describes herself as a closet writer and spiritual bartender.***

# Agua es Vida: In the Struggle

By Elise D. García OP

When former City Councilwoman María Antonietta Berriozábal begins her socio-political tours of San Antonio, Texas, she always starts downtown next to the drainage ditch where only a trickle of murky water of the *acequia* (water canal) remains. Nearly 300 years ago, soon after the Spanish missionaries and soldiers claimed lands settled for thousands of years by indigenous peoples, the *acequia* was built to bring fresh drinking water to the new occupants. The water originated from nearby springs where 10,000 years earlier the Payaya Indians had first settled, naming the area, *Yanaguana*, or “place of refreshing waters.” Bubbling out of an underground aquifer, contained in Cretaceous limestone dating back 150 million years, these waters midwived the abundant life of the region.

Today, this vast underground source of water, 180 miles long and 5-40 miles wide, is challenged to meet the needs of more than 1.7 million people and other life forms in South-Central Texas. The Edwards Aquifer, as it is known, is further challenged by San Antonio’s urban sprawl. Like many US cities, San Antonio has grown in one direction, leaving the inner city behind and, in this case, also literally paving over huge swaths of the “recharge zone” where rainwater enters and replenishes the aquifer. As María’s socio-political tour shows, decisions made over the past 30 years by politicians, hand-in-glove with business leaders, have moved the city’s development northward over the aquifer’s sensitive recharge zone—neglecting the needs of the large, minority inner-city residents and jeopardizing the area’s primary source of water.

This doubly harmful pattern of development, repeated in different ways in so many communities around the world, fails to address

poverty on Earth and continues the impoverishment of Earth, with potentially disastrous consequences in the near future. Many of us have seen computer images of coastal areas around the globe submerged by the rising seas expected from global warming. A less familiar image predicted by climate change shows all of southwestern North America, from Mexico north to Oklahoma and west to northern California, in varying shades of light to mustard yellow, simmering by mid-century under a *perpetual* Dust Bowl-style drought. According to Richard Seager of the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory at Columbia University, naturally occurring droughts can be expected to end, often with “persistent wet periods called ‘pluvials.’” In contrast, Seager writes, the anthropogenic (or human-induced) droughts predicted by global warming can be expected to continue.

*Agua es vida*, water is life. In San Antonio, this primordial truth seems to have been lost on many of the city’s political and business leaders, but it remains deep in the bones of its majority-minority and largely economically poor people. Perhaps an ancient indigenous memory of life found by refreshing waters rises within; over and over, when given the choice, the people of San Antonio have voted to protect their water. In the most recent conflict over the aquifer, a core group of Mexican-American women, including María Berriozábal, led a four-year-long effort to protect it. Taking on a mega developer, who proposed to construct a luxury PGA golf resort and spa that threatened to contaminate one of the most sensitive areas of the aquifer’s recharge zone, and city hall, which proposed to subsidize the project with huge tax benefits, the Latina women stayed in the struggle from beginning to bitter end—even as environmental and faith-based groups, among others, withdrew.

What motivated their actions? It was not one but a host of issues. And the array of concerns the Latina women expressed in the luxury golf resort struggle models a holistic view that is urgently needed as we face the greatest threat today to life on our planet—global warming. The women’s concerns in the PGA struggle included the environmental impact of golf-course pesticides and further development on the area’s water; huge tax benefits flowing to the wealthy at the expense of the poor; collusion between government officials and big business; secrecy in government decision-making and a disregard for the will of the people; solidarity with peoples around the world who have no access to clean water; concern for the welfare of generations to come; and the commodification of water, honored as sacred. Their slogans hinted at these concerns: “Not over my water. Not with my money.” “Clean Water. Clean Democracy.” “*Agua es Vida*. Water is Life.”

Over the course of the four-year struggle, the women and their allies succeeded in defeating the PGA deal—not once but *twice*—only to have their elected officials and developers pass a third PGA deal by sleight of hand, announcing the deal at Christmas and rushing it to a vote two weeks later. The luxury resort will open next year, but for these women and so many others like them, *la lucha*, the struggle, continues. In the face of the seemingly insurmountable planetary challenges now before us, this resilience, too, is illuminating. It is a dedication to community, in the most encompassing sense of the word, which we must all embrace—as if all life depends on it.

*Elise D. García OP, an Adrian Dominican Sister, is Co-Director of Santuario Sisterfarm, a sanctuary in the Texas Hill Country dedicated to cultivating diversity—biodiversity and cultural diversity. María Antonietta Berriozábal is the organization’s founding President.*

# Saving the Earth and Money at the Same Time

By Maureen Fiedler SL

I read recently that one business doing well in the midst of this current recession is the vegetable seed business. And it's no wonder. Planting an organic garden is a great way to save money on food, avoid pesticides and get physical activity at the same time.

This year, I expanded a small garden in my side yard into a "U" shape, planting a great variety of vegetables. As of early July, the garden has yielded mixed lettuce, Swiss chard, tomatoes and string beans – enough to share with neighbors. Still to come: carrots, beets, broccoli, peppers, cucumbers, zucchini and butternut squash.

It's all organic: no artificial fertilizers or pesticides, only homemade compost. Just one thing: one does have to pray that local rabbits or deer don't find their way to the goodies!



**Maureen in the garden:**

A garden in Hyattsville, MD: Tomatoes, string beans, carrots, lettuce, Swiss chard, beets... and lots more, all without chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

**Maureen in the compost:**

Why buy compost and manure when you can make your own? Table scraps (vegetable matter only), grass clippings, and leaves form a compost that generates natural heat from within and turns these "leavings" into rich soil. Natural compost is useful for both flower and vegetable gardens.



# Competition for Ocean Space

By Mary Ann Coyle SL

What is going to happen? Will we map the costal area and sell miles to the highest bidder? Juliet Eilperin, staff writer for the *Washington Post*, in her May 4, 2009, article poses some interesting questions. The stakeholders are the fishermen, the investors in offshore wind projects, the companies supporting offshore oil rigs, the recreational boaters, the tankers bringing and transporting commodities, etc. And it seems government officials, state and national, may not have anticipated the problems, studied the prevailing scientific views, nor even anticipated the political challenges this competition for ocean space reveals.

Andrew Rosenberg, a natural resources and environment professor at the University of New Hampshire, presents his view in forthright language. "We've got competition for space in the ocean, just like we have competition for space on land. How are you going to manage it? Is it the people with the most power win? Is it whoever got there first? Is it a free-for-all?"

For now, Massachusetts, California, and Rhode Island have been attempting to zone the ocean. They are drawing up rules and procedures to determine which activities can take place where. According to the *Washington Post*, the federal

government is considering a similar approach. Jane Lubchenco, chair of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for the Obama administration, has responded favorably, indicating that ocean zoning is one of her top priorities.

The US is a bit behind our European and Australian counterparts in acknowledging the competition for offshore space. Even though they have seen the problems, they are still struggling with how to reconcile new and traditional ocean uses, and how climate change will affect marine species habitats. For this country, it will be important that all stakeholders come together and consider not just their own interests but the common good of our Sacred Universe.

## THE SEA

The pull is so strong, we will not believe  
the drawing tide is meant for us,  
I mean the gift, the sea,  
the place where all the rivers meet.

Easy to forget,  
how the great receiving depth  
untamed by what we need  
needs only what will flow its way.

Easy to feel so far away  
and the body so old  
it might not even stand the touch.

But what would that be like  
feeling the tide rise  
out of the numbness inside  
toward the place to which we go  
washing over our worries of money,  
the illusion of being ahead,  
the grief of being behind,  
our limbs young  
rising from such a depth?

David Whyte

### The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world  
and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Langston Hughes

