

World Water Week in Stockholm **Michael E. Campana – 24 September 2006**

For the 16th straight year, the Stockholm International Water Institute (www.siwi.org) held its World Water Week (www.worldwaterweek.org) in Stockholm, August 20-26. This year's theme was *Beyond the River – Sharing Benefits and Responsibilities*. SIWI describes the aim of WWW as serving as the main annual arena for an exchange of views and experiences between members of the scientific, business, policy, and civil society communities to advance efforts related to water, the environment, livelihoods and poverty reduction. It's similar to the World Water Fora (WWF), but much smaller; this year's attendance was a record 2000+, which pales in comparison to the 10,000 or so who attend the WWF. It does not seem to be as politically charged as the WWF, but my sample size is admittedly small (two WWWs, one WWF). Having said that, there was a boycott of the *Hydro-Hegemony* session by Palestinian and Lebanese attendees to protest Israel's participation and its conflict with Hizbollah.

If you are looking for heavy-duty technical sessions characteristic of AGU, GSA, or the Summit, you won't find them here (well, maybe a few). It's not that kind of conference. Some of the session/workshop titles: *Hydro-Hegemony; Water and Resilience; Fighting Corruption to Reduce Poverty; Challenges in Governance of Water; Capturing the Big Picture of Gender in Water; Turning Assessment Findings into Action; Environmental Flows: Creating Benefits for Ecosystems and People; and Changing Diets and Their Implications for Water, Land, and Livelihoods*. But there were also such titles as: *Future Wastewater Treatment; Climate and Water-Related Risks; Drought, Risk and Management for Agricultural Water Use; Managing Freshwater Ecosystems to Reach the MDGs; and Water and Wastewater in the Sustainable City*. On top of all this there were plenty of OWGISs (Old White Guys/Gals In Suits/Skirts), a tribe to which I belong.

The WWW is the venue for the presentation of the Stockholm Water Prize, arguably the water world's equivalent of a Nobel Prize. This year's laureate was Dr. Asit K. Biswas, who currently heads the Third World Centre for Water Management in Mexico City. Dr. Biswas has had a long and distinguished career in water resources research, teaching, and advisement. He has served as advisor and consultant to governments, NGOs and private firms, and his writings (over 600 papers, involvement with 64 books) have been translated into 31 languages. In a somewhat idiosyncratic (some might say "cranky") acceptance speech, Biswas, ever the iconoclast, questioned the utility of water "megaconferences" (>2000 participants). He cited a survey conducted by his organization in which only 3% of the respondents said such meetings were useful. Biswas mentioned that he seemed to hear the same old stuff (SOS) over and over again. But we all still congregate, perhaps fearful that, just this once, something really significant might happen and we won't be at the table. As an aside, let me say that I find these conferences very useful, but if I had attended as many of them as Biswas has, I might agree with him.

Despite the aforementioned comments, one thing that I enjoy about WWW is serendipity. You never know to whom you will be speaking. At lunch one day I found myself sitting with three men from Bangladesh. I told them about the NGWA, and they immediately started asking me about ground water, arsenic, land subsidence, etc. At the end of lunch, as we departed, one of them smiled and said "Thank you for your valuable advice. You have just finished dining with the Bangladeshi Minister of Water Resources, his deputy, and the chair of the Joint Rivers Commission."

My previous summaries of last year's WWW and the 2003 World Water Forum in Kyoto decried the conspicuous absence of ground water in the water resources mix. "Out of sight, out of mind" seemed to be the byword of both meetings (and, from what I heard, the recent 4th WWF in Mexico City). So I was amazed and heartened when I read that one of the sessions at the 2006 WWW was *Under Cover? Transboundary Aquifers – the Hidden Asset for Riparian Cooperation in Africa*. The full-day session was organized by Germany's BGR (Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources), the African Ministers' Council on Water, UNESCO, IAH, SIWI, and the United Nations Environment Programme. The BGR has since broadened the Stockholm session towards a more focused approach to African transboundary ground water and has a WWW site www.bgr.bund.de/EN/GroundwaterTB for those of you interested. This was a superb session that, for me, set the stage for the rest of the week - I found ground water more and more evident in a number of sessions. Could this be the shape of things to come?

All in all I found the 2006 WWW a generally well-organized, thought-provoking meeting. The only glitches seemed to be the scheduling of some very popular sessions in small rooms. The *Hydro-Hegemony* session was a good example of this (maybe the Lebanese and Palestinians didn't boycott, but just couldn't get in the room). Like its 2005 counterpart, it was one of the best meetings I've ever attended (the venue sure doesn't

hurt). The theme for the 2007 meeting (August 12-18) has already been promulgated: *Progress and Perspectives on Water: Striving for Sustainability in a Changing World*. The call for papers will be posted on the WWW website in November. Now if they could just get ABBA to reunite for the closing ceremony, they would have something really special.