

CHAPTER 15 TELL and the PRICE OF WATER

Dear those of you who love water and are concerned about its future,

In hindsight, some of you who were born in the second half of the 20th century and have an interest in history will realise that over the past century, life has changed more than ever before. In 1900, we mainly got around on foot and by carriage, just like the almost endless generations of our ancestors before us. Just 100 years later, electric scooters, electric bikes, cars (whether electric or not), high-speed trains, aircraft and gigantic ships are common modes of transport, at least when we're not surfing the web instead. In this time, we (well actually the Americans) have been to the moon... (and what was the point? It's in our own solar system and won't help us much to leave this solar system when it collapses in a mere 2 billion years). It's also worth mentioning that, after the major 30-year conflict to contain German power, the number of people in the world virtually doubled in the 20th century.

With so much change, it's good that some things stay the same, including the quantity of available water. However, we use it in a different way from the generations before us. In the past, water was used for subsistence (drinking and cooking water), for personal hygiene (washing and bathing once per week) and to drive waterwheels. Nowadays, it's used for large-scale irrigation, cooling/heating (homes, offices, data centres, industrial processes and nuclear power plants) and generally for maintaining a certain standard of living (swimming pools, washing cars, cleaning). As a result, water has also become a transport and storage medium for our society's waste products, starting with fertilisers and insecticides, through to materials used in the cosmetics and pharmaceutical industries.

Many of us see all this as a water protest, while others recognise new business opportunities. Major food corporations have been focussing on the topic of water for a few years now. Not to mention the uproar that an important stakeholder provoked when he stated that water was too cheap. People saw this statement for what it was – a trick to boost profits in the mineral water business. It now transpires that this man was right after all. However, he didn't get the note that discrimination-free (!) access to a sufficient quantity of water is a fundamental human right and that this BASIC WATER must not have a price.

Water is therefore scarce – and this is not only the case for STRATEGIC WATER (=drinking water from the tap). Based on the global economic model, it would be reasonable to expect the price of water, and of STRATEGIC WATER in particular, to rapidly increase and for countries with an abundance of water to consider exporting water in the same way as oil or gas. In reality, instead of the opposite of this happening, nothing has changed at all. The price of water, which has the quality of STRATEGIC WATER virtually everywhere in Switzerland, has been stagnant at around CHF 2.00 per m³, or CHF 0.002 per litre (ZERO POINT ZERO ZERO TWO FRANCS!), for years now. This is also similar to the price of water in the rest of Europe, which is, however, lower in quality. For 0.002 francs, not only can we mix syrup, we can also flush the toilet, which goes to show: WATER IS TOO CHEAP.



Besides the water quantity, a second thing remained unchanged in the 20th century: The human tendency to use cunning and force to get what they need or want. Water shortages aren't just bad news for fish, but also for guardians of water reserves and reservoirs. Imagine that Northern Italy were to dry out... it doesn't bear thinking about. If we want to prevent this nightmare coming true, national and international water strategies must be developed and implemented as part of a coordinated approach. ZEROWATERLOSS is a vital necessity.

ZEROWATERLOSS starts with maintaining and looking after existing networks. Nowadays it is possible to accurately locate leaks completely automatically. Repairing them not only improves the availability of water, it also creates jobs which lead to qualifications. And something that is often forgotten is that, in the context of the serious energy shortage, repairing leaks is a highly efficient way of saving energy. Water doesn't just simply flow to the consumer. It is collected, treated and pumped. In countries like Germany, it still takes around 0.5 kWh to supply an end consumer with 1 m³ of water. Depending on the energy mix, this is equal to up to 0.5 kg of CO₂ emissions. If Germany, with its water network which is first-rate in comparative terms, loses around 500,000,000 m³ of water through leaks each year, this results in an energy loss of around 250,000,000 kWh, which is equal to CO₂ emissions of up to 250,000 tonnes (at a mains pressure of 3 bar, each mini leak 4 mm in diameter leads to an annual water loss of approximately 6000 m³).

For new networks, ZEROWATERLOSS means that we will separate the supply of STRATEGIC WATER from the supply of SERVICE WATER and create sufficient storage, compensation and transport capacity.

But who should pay for this? Well, what we consider to be an obvious system for taxes also seems to be appropriate for water consumption: Progressive rates. While BASIC WATER (of drinking water and service water quality) is to be free of charge, ultimately a price has to be paid for LUXURY WATER, instead of just a contribution towards expenses of a mere ZERO POINT ZERO ZERO something. Water meters are already capable of recording the consumption of BASIC and LUXURY water separately.

There is no simple answer to the question about the price of water... it will be resolved somewhere on a spectrum with war on one end and a new understanding of water and respectful use of it on the other. ZEROWATERLOSS embodies this respectful use of water, making our commitment worthwhile.