

Statement of 11th World Lake Conference

4 November, 2005; Nairobi, Kenya

As fossil footprints in ancient lake beds testify, the rich resource of lakes were a magnet for early humans tens of thousands of years ago here in Africa, and they have continued to be so through human history to our own day. The challenge now facing us is to preserve the world's lakes, complex life-supporting ecosystems containing more than 90 percent of the liquid freshwater on the earth's surface, so they can continue to provide physical and spiritual support for the generations that follow us.

To address this management challenge, we must recognize that the future of lakes depends on our understanding and appreciation of the wider connections:

- With the surrounding landscape and human activities on it,
- With the linking water system of rivers, groundwater, and wetlands,
- With the winds that carry nutrients and contaminants in from afar,
- With the rapid human changes to the Earth's atmosphere which are driving climatic instability.

We must also recognize the primary importance of the people who use lake resources and immediately experience damaging consequences. These lake dwellers, both men and women, carry the cultural memory of the community and the lake through time, and often have the best knowledge about the source of problems and viable solutions. This long-term perspective is essential because lakes have long memories when abused, and harbor many secrets in their complex dynamics. For these reasons:

- We must base management decisions first and foremost on local knowledge and insight,
- We must use available resources to build institutional capacity and scientific understanding at the community level, and to enhance the power of local people to find solutions, thereby bridging the gap between scientists, decision-makers and society.

At the same time, local people on the front line must assume responsibility along with power, since local behavior is often the source of damage to lakes. They must recognize that a healthy lake comes at a cost, and that an unhealthy lake has its costs. In cases where user fees are the chosen tool to encourage wise behavior, it is vital that the community retain a good part of the proceeds to continue their efforts.

National institutions also are vital for fostering awareness, promoting participation, and bringing together diverse interests within lake basins. When capable and effective, they provide the arena for developing broad management efforts that

consider the lake basin as a whole, and its broader connections with the linking water systems and atmospheric influences. They also provide a forum for addressing the often conflicting needs of those who inhabit lake basins and depend on lake resources. Without such an overarching framework and comprehensive perspective, there are few means for resolving conflicts over water or lake resources, or for integrating local efforts to maintain lake health into national programs and development plans. In setting these policies, national authorities must consider lake communities and ensure that the *widest* range of interests depending on lakes enjoy their benefits. In addition, national leaders act in the international arena, where they can illuminate problems -- such as transboundary management, long distance air pollution and climate change -- and press for solutions. The World Lake Vision, launched at the 3rd World Water Forum in Japan, and the lessons learned from the Lake Basin Management Initiative launched at this 11th World Lake Conference, highlight these issues and suggest ways to achieve successful lake basin management.

International assistance can provide a vital impetus for sustaining the health of lakes and their resources, but it is not the ultimate solution for managing the interaction between human activity and these living systems. Experience around the world shows that international funding from sources such as the GEF, can catalyze efforts to manage human activities in lake basins. But in the longer term, local and national governments must ensure the ongoing and stable funding needed to continue the task. Local governments will have to experiment with innovative approaches, such as fees for lake use, in order to achieve this goal. It is equally essential that communities retain and use some of the funds raised in this way to further their efforts on behalf of the lake, and those living and working in the lake basin. Above all, when addressing lake problems, international agencies must place primary importance on local needs when developing their action agendas and programs.

Over recent decades, we have been slowly learning how to manage the interactions between human activity and these living systems. This experience underscores the key role of lakes in integrated water resources management. These experiences, which scientists and managers have gathered and synthesized, provide important lessons for sustaining the health of both natural and manmade lakes that provide water for humans and nature. It is imperative to embrace these lessons and build on them if we are to meet our pressing water needs in the decades ahead.

The fact that water underpins virtually all the Millennium Development Goals provides persuasive evidence of the need for strategic partnerships, including the private sector. These can encourage equitable access to lakes and their resources, in order to alleviate poverty, provide secure food supplies and economic development, improving the lives and livelihoods of those depend on lakes and their resources.