

## RIFS-Blogpost

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Scientists and communicators joined the discussion at Berlin Science Week, which focussed on narratives of water governance that are often erased and devalued.

A crisp autumn evening in Berlin set the backdrop for the panel discussion “Ecopolitics traversing Waterbodies: tales and epistemologies influencing water governance” as part of Berlin

**! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !**

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Science Week 2024. For the last 3 years, the Ecopolitics and Just Transformations research group (EcoPol) has taken this stage to explore different ecopolitical dimensions of commons. On this occasion, I, Tau Samper (EcoPol, RIFS), Shyam Wuppuluri (Fellow, RIFS), Jenny García Ruales (Amazon of Rights Project, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology), and Şermin Güven (Associate Member of Disaster Research Unit FU-Berlin) led the discussion moderated by Elisabeth Weydt at the Berlin Museum of Natural History.

I designed and organised the session, foregrounding narratives on water governance which are often erased and devalued by hegemonic knowledge systems. The session included a participatory co-writing exercise in which the audience was invited to contribute to the discussion on stage. Participants were encouraged to pen one or more lines describing their own relationship to water bodies to weave a collective text. The exercise brought to life the panel's topic: we build narratives together, influencing each other, compounding individual actions into the complex whole.

...Like the tides come and go - Waves tell us stories of  
places close and far  
Full of colours, fishes, and life. With my boat I plan to cross  
the ocean to  
Breathe the salty air, feel the spray on my skin and connect  
to where we all come from originally  
I look at my hand and with the other I touch, I open them,  
my palms are wet...

(The complete poem follows at the end of this post).

Water is critical for life on Earth, and plays a vital role in Earth system processes, particularly in climate regulation. Throughout history, the ecopolitics of water bodies have been central to human

societies, directly affecting their economies, technologies, survival, prosperity, and cultural beliefs. Furthermore, water bodies are connected to our emotional and mental well-being in intricate ways that are yet to be understood by modern science. Climate change, overexploitation, and pollution are affecting the availability and quality of water resources, which is combined with intensified political disputes over their use and control. Effective water politics for sustainable and equitable governance must involve governments, NGOs, researchers, industry, civil society, farmers, and Indigenous organizations, among other actors at both international and local levels.

How can different interests be reconciled? How are they shaped by cultural and political narratives? Could a decolonial approach influence these epistemologies? Whose narratives, or what kinds of narratives have been systematically overlooked and excluded from decision-making? What is the value of platforming overlooked knowledges, and how could they expand our understanding of sustainable governance? These were some of the questions that inspired the panel. We invited scientists and communicators to join this conversation and encouraged them to use a storytelling format to speak to the audience, drawing on experiences from their lives and research.

#### 1.1.1.1 Water: A Living Mirror of Human Actions

From the rivers of India to the vital waterways of Mesopotamia and Ecuador, stories of water are intertwined with our relationship to the environment, governance, and each other. Shyam Wuppuluri spoke of how in parts of India, some people see rivers as living entities and providers of life that are cherished and spoken to with respect and hope as part of a shared existence. Yet, modern narratives, shaped by the subject-object divide, have distanced humans from



nature, creating the basis for an exploitative relationship. In Ecuador, rivers tell a story not just of life but of pollution, and appalling droughts. Their waters flow nonetheless, receiving, carrying, and expressing the consequences of human actions. Jenny García Ruales shared a recent case in Quito, Ecuador, in which the Río Machángara was brought before the court in the form of a glass containing its polluted water to reclaim justice for itself. These legal proceedings illustrate how the concept of granting rights to nature, embedded in the Ecuadorian Constitution, offers opportunities to rethink governance frameworks.

### 1.1.1.2 Climate Change, Conflict, and the Weaponization of Water

The Euphrates and Tigris have long sustained life in the Mesopotamia region. These life-giving rivers, which originate in East Turkey/North Kurdistan and flow through Kurdistan, are under dire threat. Climate change and human activities are causing unprecedented droughts that sever the connections between small rivers and their primary sources. Şermin Güven's analysis, combining precipitation and temperature data with insights from interviews with local farmers, reveals that drought events previously had a probability of occurring only once every 250 years. However, with the average global temperature now 1.2°C above preindustrial levels, the likelihood has risen sharply to more than one event per decade. If global temperatures increase by 2°C, the prediction is that these droughts could occur as often as every five years, or even more frequently. In some areas of this region, water scarcity is further exacerbated by human mismanagement and militarization. In zones like Rojava, an area severely affected by the extreme drought of 2021, water availability is not only a climate issue but also an instrument for subjugation. The Turkish government's increasing control over water stations and other critical infrastructure highlights how water scarcity can become a weapon in conflict areas.

### 1.1.1.3 Indigenous Knowledges and Relational Wisdom

Indigenous traditions across the globe offer alternative epistemologies often rooted in storytelling and intimate connection to the environment. "In these contexts, knowledge has been used as a means of building relationships - with nature, with each other, and with the cosmos - rather than a means for accumulation", Shyam Wuppuluri reminded the audience. Western language and epistemologies often reinforce this separation, placing individuals, the human species, and scientific inquiry at the apex of a hierarchical

pyramid, with scientists distanced from their objects of study, “kidnaping knowledge” rather than engaging in reciprocal relationships, as Şermin Güven expressed. In our postcolonial global scenario, knowledge that reminds us of entangled wholeness is often othered. Indigenous people’s representatives and experts are often tokenised, instead of being integrated as equal and essential voices in scientific discussions, and international policy-making.

#### 1.1.1.4 Anthro-po-responsibilities

The concept of the Anthropocene places humanity at the centre of environmental transformation, demanding accountability for the crises we have created. Climate change has intensified water scarcity, pollution, and conflict, while also offering the opportunity to rethink our role as we strive for sustainable transformation. We humans have the responsibility to speak up, yet global silence persists around the intersections of environmental degradation, state violence, and exploitation, as asserted by Şermin Güven. This silence begs critical reflection. For instance, what does it mean for vulnerable populations when warring parties use water scarcity as a weapon? How can the global community address the compounded crises of climate change and conflict, ensuring political justice and ecological sustainability for those most affected? The flow of water existed long before geopolitical borders and checkpoints. From India’s revered rivers to Ecuador’s courts, Kurdistan’s resilient plains and Germany’s veins the message is clear: the health of our waters reflects the health of our relationships—with each other and with the Earth; relationships for which we are together responsible.

#### 1.1.1.5 The possibility of co-visioned narratives

The text co-produced by 23 participants of the audience offers a precious glimpse into the power of diverse voices in illuminating

unexpected associations and alternative perspectives. Each contributor was able to read and respond to the sentence of their predecessor, creating a reciprocal narrative of participatory poetics.

Water is life, my life, our life, let's be a river  
All is water and vibrating, we vibrate together, our stories  
intertwining to make our reality We are bringing together  
knowledge of all the bodies of water, rivers, lakes, and  
oceans we have seen and interacted with  
Like the tides come and go - Waves tell us stories of places  
close and far  
Full of colours, fishes, and life. With my boat I plan to cross  
the ocean to  
Breathe the salty air, feel the spray on my skin and connect  
to where we all come from originally  
I look at my hand and with the other I touch, I open them,  
my palms are wet  
Again I put my hands together, touching each other, they  
form a bowl;  
I use them to take water from the river  
I take a sip of water. I can tell, immediately, the water,  
despite being cold and refreshing, is not clean. But I am  
thirsty and drink. I must, if I don't want to be severely  
dehydrated. I think about  
any illnesses the water from the river can bring. I am  
worried, of course, and I think about how this pollution will  
affect the animals who inhabit the water and depend upon it  
I am very aware of and interested in algal blooms. They  
can release toxins that cause massive die-offs in coastal  
areas. They can also affect people or animals that swim in  
the water during these blooms  
But as a human, I wish the only harmful thing we had in  
coastal areas was algae, not humans creating pollution. I  
feel like  
the divide between the water in my body and the water in  
front of me would blur. I wish I could see myself in that flow,

without trying to understand it, to kidnap it. Just as a way of  
flowing in life, of having life in the centre

Water is all around us and our ways of living are deeply  
integrated with the water. It becomes a subconscious  
dependency

It shows in our sense of what is important, what causes us  
to be anxious or afraid. In that way, there is a mutuality  
between the natural environment and us, whether we are  
aware of it or not

And I just want to jump in, dive deep and drink a lot!

Me too! I want to dive deep and enjoy the silence  
underwater

Rivers are more than a source for breaking thirst. They  
share stories with us

Rivers share stories with us and our lives can be as a river  
flow

And the stories rivers tell are silent and you should be still  
to hear it

How we look at waterbodies as entities when we are so far  
from them in our everyday lives? And not only waters,  
forests and mountains...

All bodies confluent in heart to be one with the global river  
system.

