

What We Owe the
Water: A Call for a
Fossil Fuel Treaty

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We Come from Water

For much of my childhood, the ocean was less a place than an idea — something we knew was there, just a short drive away, yet never quite within reach.

I was born in a South Africa carved up by apartheid, where geography was not neutral, and where land and water were divided by race. In the early 1980s my family moved to Chatsworth, a working-class Durban township for Indian-origin families, about 15 kilometres from the coast. Many families were uprooted from their mixed residential suburbs and “dumped” in Chatsworth to make way for a whites-only neighbourhood. We lived close enough to smell the salt in the air on a windy day, but far enough away that the sea might as well have belonged to another world.

Even though Durban's shoreline is dotted with public beaches, apartheid decided who could set foot on which stretch of sand and who could not. The prime beaches — those with lifeguards, smooth walkways and calm, safe swimming areas — were reserved for white people. These polished and patrolled spaces were considered paradise. Hotels and restaurants lined their shores, built and serviced by Black (African, Coloured and Indian) workers who were forbidden from enjoying the beauty they helped maintain. The beaches set aside for the rest of us were fewer, harder to reach and often unsafe, with rougher currents and scant facilities. The closest that Black people could get to the “white” beaches was by driving along the narrow main road that meandered along the coast — while being carefully monitored by the police.

The ocean was not a playground for me. It was something withheld — a constant reminder of where we did not belong. Despite this, most working-class families managed a day or two at one of the “non-white” beaches during the Christmas holidays. We tried to make the best of it; sometimes hard to do as our parents were

terrified of the heavy currents and backwash that saw many drownings each year.

Under the *Reservation of Separate Amenities Act*, the South African state policed everything, even the simple act of swimming. If any of us dared venture onto a white beach, we could be fined or arrested. As a child, I couldn't understand how the same ocean, endlessly moving and indivisible, could be segregated. The injustice seemed absurd: how could anyone own the waves? Rigorously enforcing the segregation of beaches to prevent people of different races swimming in the same water struck me then — as it does today — as ridiculous.

Yet even withheld, even from a distance, water was ever-present in my imagination. Its very inaccessibility gave it power. Standing on a hill or a roadside lookout, glimpsing the shimmer of the Indian Ocean, the sea represented a freedom we were denied. It stirred something in me I could not yet name — the idea that life could be larger than the fences around us, and that beyond apartheid's geography of control lay a world uncontained. The ocean was both near enough to see and impossibly far away. And in that contradiction, I learnt one of my first lessons

about justice: what is denied to some is often hoarded by others.

In 1983, due to a terrible drought that devastated our province, the government imposed strict water usage limits across the greater Durban area. Households were limited to 400 litres per day, the use of hoses was banned, and those found to be in violation of the regulations faced stiff fines. This affected everyone but had a particularly devastating effect on those living in council flats and duplexes in Chatsworth and other poor areas. Many of these dwellings had communal water meters servicing up to eight homes. The monthly water bill was based on the consumption of the entire block then divided equally by the number of dwellings, with each household paying an equal share. Those living alone, mostly older people with low pension incomes, used relatively little water, but found themselves paying the same amount as extended family households, of which there were many. It was common for grandparents and other relatives to all live under one roof.

The drought and the fines put unbearable strain on the finances of the poorest households and caused considerable distress and unrest within

the community. Water restrictions led to health problems and hardship, especially for the sick, the elderly and the most overcrowded households.

When I think back to those days, I remember not only the thirst and the anger, but also an awakening of my social consciousness. I was still a teenager when, along with my neighbours, we mobilised against the unfair fines that were punishing those who could least afford it. One humid afternoon, two bus-loads of people from our community — mostly women, pensioners and young people — stood outside the local council office, holding hand-painted signs demanding fair access to water. We weren't seasoned activists; we were simply tired of being punished for our imposed poverty. That protest taught me that justice isn't only about grand ideals — it's about who gets to drink, who gets to bathe, and who gets to live with dignity.

This was one of my first lessons in what we now call climate justice. Long before I understood what that term meant, I knew instinctively that the struggle for water was a struggle for life itself. The drought in our province and the rising seas in the Pacific Ocean are two verses of the same song — a song about inequality, about