



International Year of Freshwater 2003



Message from the Director-General of UNESCO on the Occasion of the Launch of the International Year of Freshwater (2003)

It is my privilege to address all of you on behalf of UNESCO on this very special occasion of the launch of the International Year of Freshwater. It is special because it is the Member States of the United Nations – the whole globe – that have willed this Year to be celebrated in recognition of the crucial importance of sound care of freshwater resources for the well-being of society. And it is special to UNESCO because, jointly with UNDESA, we have been entrusted with the responsibility of coordinating the activities of the Year.

Water is presently one of UNESCO's five highest concerns. UNESCO's interest in water today, of course, is grounded upon a long-standing engagement with water-related issues, mainly but certainly not exclusively from a scientific perspective. Thus, by creating the International Hydrological Programme in 1975, UNESCO pioneered efforts to provide a scientific basis for evaluating global water resources and formulating ethical and socio-economic principles to guide water management and development practices. Over the years, we have integrated the concerns of other sectors and disciplines into our approach to freshwater – we know, for example, that the availability of water affects educational opportunities, especially those of girls and women in rural areas whose onerous water-carrying tasks often reduce or eliminate their chances of receiving an education. We also recognize the important interface between culture and water, especially where local traditions and customs regulate access and use. Moreover, we see the connections between freshwater and major ecological concerns, including the oceans and global warming. UNESCO, therefore, brings a multifaceted approach to freshwater issues, one which draws upon all of our fields of competence.

UNESCO's approach is also shaped by our mission to promote peace, security and development through international cooperation. I am convinced that water can be an agent of peace, rather than conflicts, and UNESCO is looking at ways that will allow this century to be one of "water peace" rather than one of "water wars". By developing principles and methods to manage this resource efficiently and ethically, we move a step closer to the goal of sustainable development. Through a people-centred and policy-oriented focus, UNESCO is committed to the Millennium Development Goals and the targets set by the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

International cooperation is of the essence. UNESCO is proud to host the Secretariat of the World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP). Through a concerted effort involving 23 UN agencies and many other partners, the Programme will produce the *World Water Development Report*, whose first edition will be released at the 3rd World Water Forum at Kyoto, Japan, in March 2003. For the first time, national decision-makers, non-governmental organizations and ordinary citizens will have access to a regular assessment of the global and regional water situation.

The celebration of the International Year of Freshwater affords an unequalled opportunity not only to reach all regions, countries and communities with clear messages but also to listen carefully to what the world, at all levels, has to say on the vital, even sacred, subject of water. The Year will be marked by many events; I will here mention just one. At the end of 2003, the Pan-African Conference on Water Resources Management will take place in Addis Ababa, marking the coming of age of a continent in this endeavour. An 'African Water Development Report' will be presented,

an initiative of and prepared by African organizations in the mould of the *World Water Development Report*. I am pleased to inform you that UNESCO has set up the Year's web site, which was inaugurated today. Open to one and all, it will have an educational focus and all countries and UN agencies will be able to incorporate and publicize their activities and contributions to the Year. All are invited to share and participate.

Collectively, we must ensure that we do not squander this opportunity provided by the Year to imprint the vital importance of freshwater on the consciousness and conscience of the whole world. For the sake of international peace, human security and sustainable development, we must be caring, sparing and sharing in all we do regarding freshwater. Let us now spread this message far and wide.

Koichiro Matsuura
12 December 2002