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**Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications**

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## We are all equal before water

**Federal Councillor Moritz Leuenberger at the 3. YangtzeForum.**



We Swiss are rather proud of our Alps. Some of the peaks stretch to over 4000 metres and anyone who manages to climb them all is considered a hero. But China's highest mountains are over 5000 metres high. That makes us Swiss feel rather small.

We are pretty impressed with our largest river, the Rhine, which at its fastest point flows at up to 5000 cubic metres per second - at high water the Yangtze transports up to 100,000 cubic metres, twenty times more. Our river looks like a little stream in comparison.

We marvel at the output of our hydropower plants – yet the turbines of the Three Gorges Dam produce more than twice as much electricity a year as all of Switzerland's hydropower plants put together.



If we simply compare such proportions, the differences between our two countries are enormous and it borders on impudence when I, as a Swiss, offer remarks to you on problems relating to water.

But whether large or small, water has for thousands of years held the same meaning and importance for all. Depending on the scale, this may vary quantitatively, but for the average man, not qualitatively.

### Water is life and death

Water is the basis for life, for our bodies and our souls. Water feeds both:

Water quenches thirst and hunger. Water inspires our fantasies.



All around the world countless myths and legends have evolved about water, particularly around river regions; around the Yangtze just as much as the Rhine. According to legend, there is a beautiful mermaid in the Rhine who bewitches and bewilders wistful sailors with her spellbinding song and sends them to their ruin.

This mermaid symbolises both life and death. What is true for sailors is true for all of us whether we live in large or small states: We want to use the water, but we must also protect ourselves from threats it poses.

We use water to produce (bio) fuels for cars, we use it to produce meat. Eight to ten times more water is used in meat production than in the production of cereals. Meat consumption is increasing exponentially around the world. That leads to water shortages and consequently to death, war and migration.

All countries, whether large or small, are affected by flooding, water pollution and global warming:

- In the Yangtze estuary, rising sea levels allow salt water to enter the river delta, which threatens the ground water and leads to soil salination.
- In Switzerland, we face the threat of flooding due to melting glaciers;
- Other countries face the threat of water shortages due to drought,
- Others still face threat of rising sea levels, which inundate islands and displace their inhabitants.

## National water policy

Man has shaped its relationship with water since time immemorial. Every country, whether large or small, faces similar dilemmas in terms of its national water policy.



We want to use water and at the same time we have to protect ourselves against it. This leads to conflicting aims.

- On the one hand, we construct dams to irrigate our fields and generate power,
  - On the other, we want to maintain our landscapes, cultural heritage and living space.
- We want to make the most of hydropower because water is a renewable, and therefore environmentally-friendly, source of energy.
  - But we also need to ensure there is enough water for fauna and flora, for biodiversity.
- We transport containers by river and widen them in order to do so,
  - At the same time we want to sustain the vital river ecosystems.
- We want to maintain our agricultural lands and ensure their irrigation;
  - At the same time we want to widen the river beds and so protect ourselves against flooding.

We want to use water to satisfy so many different needs that these aims are bound to conflict. We can only resolve these conflicts if we find a balance between these different interests.

Anyone who travels by water knows just how important balance is. In a boat balance is essential, otherwise we risk capsizing. In order to steer in the right direction, we don't stand at the bow and peer down at the water, we lift our heads and look ahead towards the horizon. That way we open our spirit for a long term and sustainable outlook so we can determine the course of our journey.

In terms of water management, the same conflicting aims arise all around the world, albeit on entirely different scales. But at the core, they are the same questions both in small and large states. That is why small and large countries can work very well together.

## Cooperation between China and Switzerland

Switzerland and China have already been doing this for a number of years. We both benefit from the experience of the other:

- Switzerland benefits from China's experience in dealing with floods and landslides in mountainous regions. In addition, China allows us to study the biodiversity of this outstanding region.
- And conversely, China has sought inspiration from our strategies for dealing with water and from our legislation, from our philosophy of sustainability. We are delighted and honoured.
- Chinese experts and scientists travel to Switzerland, Swiss experts travel to China.
- Last year the Chinese minister of water resources visited Switzerland, this year I have travelled to China.

This mutual exchange is fruitful and strengthens the friendship that we have been fostering for almost six decades (in 1950 Switzerland was one of the first countries to recognise the People's Republic of China proclaimed in 1949).

We wish to further consolidate and institutionalise these exchanges with the Memorandum of Understanding that we will sign during my visit. We look forward to this cooperation.

## Global water policy

However, we find ourselves in the midst of a global water crisis. The plundering of our resources is destroying the rain forests, the excessive emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> speed up the pace of global warming. The rivers are part of the water ecosystem that covers four-fifths of the planet. If sea levels rise by one metre, the permafrost melts and the reservoirs of the world empty, salt water enters the Yangtze and navigation on the Rhine is hindered due to high water.

But worldwide the consequences are far worse:

Water shortages lead to poverty, war and migration. That is why the international community has placed global climate policy and the Millennium Development Goals at the top of its agenda.



There have also been successes:

It has achieved this with regard to one of the most hazardous poisons threatening the waters, fish and thus man - namely mercury. The breakthrough for a worldwide ban on mercury was achieved in Nairobi two months ago. This shows that the international community is capable of reaching agreement.

It must also be possible for a post-Kyoto agreement in Copenhagen this December.

This should include binding targets for the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. All states must assume their responsibility, small states just as much as large states, even if the measures taken by larger countries have a greater impact. It makes no difference where in the world CO<sub>2</sub> is emitted. If CO<sub>2</sub> emissions increase, it has an impact on the climate throughout the planet. That is why CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have to be reduced globally.

Worldwide efforts against global warming can only be successful if large states such as the USA, India, Brazil and China help to bring about a breakthrough for a post-Kyoto agreement. The whole world hopes that China will also commit to making a contribution towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions at the climate conference in Copenhagen.



Each country can shape its own water policy and is grateful for the help and inspiration provided by its friends. But we are also all in the same boat. On this planet we are all dependent on one another. We can only allow ourselves to be satisfied when all are satisfied. If we destroy the environment, we all go down. Therefore, we are all responsible for one another. If we act together – like China and Switzerland – we can shape the world sustainably.

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