

Somos Agua: Perceiving Water Differently

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At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we humans find ourselves in the position of having to collectively make some far-reaching decisions on a wide range of water issues (e.g., those involving quality, quantity, ownership, and distribution) that will affect our future and that of many other species on this planet. Much has been and will be written about the upcoming decision-making process and the factors that are most relevant to it. There exist a limited, but ever growing, number of people who believe that we cannot meet our current water challenges from essentially the same collective perception of water that initially created those challenges. In other words, it may be quite difficult to “solve our problems at the level of those problems” because the seed or core of the problem is always inherent in the solutions. According to this worldview, a fundamental expansion or shift in our perception of water will be required to address these water challenges.

How do we alter our collective perceptions of water? Postmodern people are fortunate in having access to many different ways of formulating, or reformulating, their perceptions of water. The natural sciences provide a powerful tool for intellectually understanding water, while anthropological studies provide us with some inkling of how ancient peoples perceived and revered water. Additionally, we have access to the insights of naturalists and, through their teachings, to methods of observing and merging with water. Through many different spiritual traditions, we have access to rituals, writings, and art that present diverse views of water. Finally, we are able to personally experience water in the natural world, which may be the most important tool in expanding our perceptions. *Somos Agua* reminds us that we are water and, as part of Expo Zaragoza 2008, has combined different ways of perceiving water into an integrated experiential format for all visitors.

The creative use of sound, images, interactive animation, and subtle storytelling permit visitors to experience water in an unusual way. Experiences are provided in four venues that build upon one another in telling water’s story, which is really a component of every story. As presented through the people, animals, plants, oceans, freshwaters, and ancient cultures of Mexico, visitors realize that water is shared by all earthly forms and is the primary essence of our own physical existence. Similar to ancient beliefs from around the world, the highly advanced cultures of prehistoric Mexico recognized that water was not merely an inert substance required for their existence, but instead was a sacred being that carried or transmitted the life force into our observable world. Because we rarely see the water that exists in plants, animals, people, air, food, soil, rocks, or stars, we mistakenly believe that water is confined to lakes, rivers, and oceans. On the contrary, water is the primary component of almost all earthly life forms, within which a variety of biomolecules and specialized cells either structure the water or are structured by the water in manner that creates the biological diversity we observe around us.

From the billion-year-old aquatic microorganisms that inhabit the clear desert waters of Cuatro Ciénegas to the complex network of freshwater caves and cenótes that underlie the jungles of Yucatán to the great whales that migrate along the coast of Baja California, Mexico is a land of diverse waters and unlimited opportunities to experience them. *Somos Agua* reminds us that the waters of these beautiful landscapes may have once resided in the heart of a person, or on the surface of a comet, or in the hot interior of Earth. Moving from

the waters and water beings of Mexico to the molecular magic of water's essence, the visitor is invited to experience the interior of a vortex—one of the most recognizable and mysterious of water's flow forms. Although water is not the only substance that spawns vortices, it is the substance that has received the most attention on this planet. The artist Leonardo da Vinci believed that water vortices were a key to understanding the power of the universe. Similarly, many ancient and esoteric traditions maintain that a vortex permits the interconnecting of different levels or realms of existence.

Transported from water's macroscopic realm, the visitor now experiences the rhythm, geometry, and dynamism of its microscopic realm. This is a water world that few people ever see and one that permits a glimpse of water molecules interacting with each other and forming the clusters and networks that are believed to give rise to water's strange physical properties, remarkable adaptability, and mediation of worldly processes. Perhaps water's most recognizable mediation relates to the origin of biological life here on Earth. Whereas interpretations of this process vary tremendously, water's role in the creational process is proclaimed by scientific theories, ancient myths, and religious texts. From the metaphoric waters of chaos and the planet's early oceans emerged living beings whose bodies were composed primarily of water and smaller life forms—not unlike those in Cuatro Ciénegas. Once again, the visitor observes water as the common element in most earthly forms and is invited to play with this perception in an interactive manner.

What happens when a water being touches a water surface? The visitor discovers that pressure waves are created and then move outward from the point of contact—similar to what happens when a drop of water falls onto a water surface. And what happens when a whale sings into the water? Sound waves are generated and move outward in all directions from the whale. If conditions are optimal, the song traverses entire oceans and reaches the underlying rock and overlying air. When we step into water, we are communicating our own signature through the water and into the Earth. Human beings have always used water to communicate with each other through oceanic and inland waterways, as well as through interpersonal contact. Because all of our cells are bathed in water, everything we hear, see, taste, smell, or feel about each other and the world is communicated through water.

Even our perception of stars is influenced by water because most stars contain water in their outer layer, which filters the light or energy released into space and, thus, affects their appearance. Our own star, the sun, was birthed from a giant dust and gas cloud containing water, which was integral to the star birthing process and which, in turn, produced more water—some of which is all around us. The visitors are treated to a cosmic view of water that is almost beyond imagination, particularly if they have considered the source of their water to be household faucets. This final experience enables visitors to reflect upon their journey through water and to see, hear, and taste water in a setting designed to heighten their physical senses and to reinforce the relevance of *Somos Agua*. A departing message invites visitors to consider water as a sacred gift—not only because of its scarcity or utility, but also because of its ubiquity and connection to the mysteries of our world.

A shift in our perception of water would not preclude using water to meet basic human needs. Conversely, it would result in the world's human and nonhuman inhabitants having greater access to the water that historically has been shared among all species. Can we utilize the gift of water and, at the same time, know it as far more than a right, commodity, or resource? How might this “knowing” alter the way that we address our challenges with water? Perhaps our emphasis will shift from demanding that water adapt to our ideals and concepts to realizing that we ultimately adapt to water's nature and wisdom.