

# The International Law Association's *Berlin Rules on Water Resources*

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# The Global Water Crisis

- Humans (and most of the plants and animals on which humans depend) must use water with a narrow quality range
- Human demand for water is expanding exponentially
  - Burgeoning populations
  - Changing patterns of use
  - Only somewhat offset by higher costs
- The supply of water is fixed or declining
  - Pollution
  - Climate change
- Result: 1,000,000,000 cannot obtain safe water for their own needs

# Water as an International Resource

- Water - an ambient resource - largely ignores international boundaries
- Approximately 264 river basins - including most larger rivers and home to at least 40% of the world's population - cross boundaries
- Result - the English word "rival" derives from Latin word *rivalis* - people who live on opposite sides of a river

# Customary International Law

- Elements of customary international law:
  - A consistent practices by States
  - Out of a sense of legal obligation (*opinio juris*)
- Consider customary law in local settings
  - When does a trail between villages become legally obligatory?
  - Many real world examples
  - In good measure, the common law is customary law

# Milestones in International Water Law

- State practice crystallizes for trans-boundary water resources (1900-1950)
- The *Helsinki Rules* approved (ILA, 1966)—soon accepted as the definitive summary
- The *UN Convention on Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses* approved by the General Assembly (1997)
- The Gabcikovo-Nagymoros Decision in the International Court of Justice (1997)—cites the *UN Convention* as evidence of customary international law

# Customary Rules of International Water Law

- Only riparian states have a legal claim upon a water resource
- Traditional (competing) theories
  - Absolute Territorial Sovereignty
  - Absolute Riverine Integrity
  - Equitable Utilization

# The Codified Customary International Law of Transboundary Waters

- *Helsinki Rules* - equitable utilization is the only rule that matters
- *UN Convention* - major debate regarding the relation of equitable utilization to the “no harm rule”

# The Challenge of Current and Future Stresses

- We need to coordinate adequately:
  - International environmental law;
  - International human rights law;
  - International humanitarian law; and
  - International water law
- States are developing a new governing paradigm - joint, basin-wide management (sometimes called "equitable participation")

# Why did the International Law Association revise the *Helsinki Rules*?

- The *Helsinki Rules* were nearly 40 years old
- The *UN Convention* might never come into effect
- The *UN Convention* says little or nothing about the issues raised here
- Even when the *UN Convention* does address a point, it provides only a very general framework
- New rules could provide a comprehensive, cogent, and complete summary of all customary international law relevant to water management decisions

# The *Berlin Rules*

- Approved by the ILA, 21 August 2004
- The New Paradigm (all waters):
  - Participatory management
  - Conjunctive management
  - Integrated management
  - Sustainability
  - Minimization of environmental harm
- The New Paradigm (internationally shared waters):
  - Cooperation
  - Equitable utilization
  - Avoidance of transboundary harm

# Participatory Management

- A right of access to water
- A right to a voice in decisions affecting one's life
- Access to education
- Protection of particularly vulnerable communities
- A right to compensation
- Access to legal remedies

# Sustainability and Minimization of Environmental Harm

- Ecological integrity
  - Ecological flows
  - Alien species
  - Pollution prevention or control
  - Hazardous substances
- Prior assessment of impacts
- Precautionary principle
- Least net environmental harm
- Compensation for injuries (“polluter pays”)

# International Waters

- International cooperation
  - Exchange of information
  - Notification of programs, projects, or activities
  - Consultations
  - Harmonization and coordination of national policies
  - Establishment of joint management institutions
- Equitable utilization—having “due regard” to the avoidance of harm
  - No *a priori* preferences—except for “vital human needs”
  - Factors to be considered:
    - Natural features;
    - The social and economic needs of the States;
    - Each State’s dependence on the waters in question;
    - The effects of a use or uses in one State upon uses in the other State;
    - The extent of conservation or economy of use in each State;
    - Existing and potential uses;
    - The availability of alternatives to the planned or existing use;
    - The sustainability of proposed or existing uses; and
    - The minimization of environmental harm.
- Avoidance of transboundary harm—having “due regard” to equitable utilization

# Groundwater

- Still Little Clear Law on Groundwater
- Must Be Managed Conjunctively with Surface Waters
- Groundwater Generally Subject to the Same Laws as Surface Waters
- Deserves Special Protection because of Its Differing Characteristics

# Other Issues Addressed in the *Berlin Rules*

- Navigation
- War and Armed Conflict
- Dispute Resolution

# Publication

- Published in the *Report of the Seventy-First Conference of the International Law Association* (Berlin 2004), published by the International Law Association, Charles Clore House, 17 Russell Square, London WC1B 5DR, United Kingdom
- The text (and a supporting sources document) are also available through [www.ila-hq.com](http://www.ila-hq.com)