

The Register-Guard

Opinion

Reyes-Santos: Recognize our interdependence with water

By **Alaí Reyes-Santos**

Posted Mar 11, 2019 at 12:01 AM

Oregon World Water Day, a local celebration of a U.N. observance, is March 22.

As we see less rain and snow, as our drinking water is endangered, as wells dry up, as shorelines recede and the sea appears where it was not before, as more fires fill our air with smoke, it makes sense to take a day to reflect on our relationship to water. Can we transform ourselves to sustain her health and ours for generations to come?

Scientists and historians document that European colonization and industrialization brought about a quick environmental and climate-changing catastrophe: The destruction of millennia-old ways of caring for nature and our interdependent relationship with water.

In Oregon, we remember the fallen forests; the disappearance of Willamette Valley oak savannahs; dams that broke the natural cycles of water beings; the salmon barely returning home; Celillo Falls imploded; thousands of dead fish; families visiting from island to island in the Klamath waters; watersheds destroyed by exploitative agricultural and industrial settlements; disappearing camas and tule fields.

Some say that it is too late to transform our relationship to water. But if humans enacted such changes in just 500 years, we can also transform how we live and care for water now.

Water is essential for life.

At times we have believed we are superior to her. That we could exploit her and she would always be there.

We have been wrong.

In indigenous and Afro-Caribbean worldviews, water is not subservient to the needs of humans; but rather a being in an interdependent relationship with us. Not caring for water is a betrayal of water and the human community as well.

We thank the water that cleanses us in the shower, the rain keeping plants, trees, and our foods alive, the river that cools us off, the sea that brings fish and joy.

We conserve it. Every day we are reminded that it needs us to live and we need it. When, as in most places, drinking water is carried from a spring, when water only gets to people's homes twice a week, or never, this is clear.

It is clear that flushing toilets is wasteful, that toilet paper kills our water, and that it is dangerous to send our waste to our waters, which cannot naturally decompose it.

We honor her natural pathways and watersheds, her seasonal appearances.

Pesticides are not an option.

We thank the water we drink, let her breathe, and receive light in clay or glass vases. She responds through oxygenated bubbles that hydrate us, unlike the dead water from pipes or plastic.

We know she feels our love and our betrayal. We care for her and she cares for us now and for generations to come.

It is not too late to change. Rather, it is necessary as we transition into new climate patterns. Oregon Water Day asks that we transform ourselves, that we learn from native, black, migrant, low-income and rural communities to care, conserve, and acknowledge water as an equal in an interdependent relationship.

Alaí Reyes-Santos is a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Oregon and writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard.