



TWV Podcast #027
Effective Communication in the Water Industry with Donna Vincent Roa
Show Notes at <http://thewatervalues.com/pod27>

Intro: Welcome to The Water Values Podcast. This is the podcast dedicated to water utilities, resources, treatment, reuse, and all things water. Now here's your host, Dave McGimpsey.

Dave: Hello and welcome to another session of The Water Values Podcast! Thanks for joining me.

I'm in the midst of a summer cold, so I'm going to keep my introductory remarks brief. First, I hope everyone had a great Labor Day weekend in the U.S. and for those in other parts of the world, I hope you had a great weekend, as well.

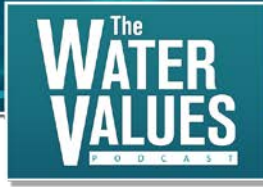
Today, Donna Vincent Roa joins us to talk about communications in the water sector. She's got a very interesting perspective on water and a few things she talked about really struck me as great ideas. So keep listening and I think you'll really enjoy Donna's interview. And please remember to listen all the way to the end to take in the all-important disclaimer.

With that said, let's get on with it. Open the valves, fasten your seatbelts and here we go.

Dave: Well, Donna, thanks so much for coming on to the Water Values Podcast. Greatly appreciate your time. If you could, could you tell us, please, a little bit about your background and how you got interested in water?

Donna: Sure. Well, I've been lucky enough to work in the area of public health and the environment for my entire career and during that time, I got a chance to travel to, I think I'm up to 34 countries now, and two of those countries provided me with experiences that I think are very important to our discussion today in answering the question: "Why I got into water". So I'll talk about my background and segue into why I got into water. I've served international organizations in communication and public affairs and strategic communication issues. I also have done brand management for global organizations and have been working in the water industry probably for the last seven or eight years now, with a particular emphasis on water sector communication.

When I worked in my early career in public health, I got a chance to travel to Senegal, and I visited a hospital there. When we think of a hospital, we think of a fairly large facility with doors to get in and floors where you go to visit people. In this particular case, the hospital was something we would call a gazebo, a very large gazebo. But it had no doors. It had no walls.



There were towels on the floor where kids were and nurses walking around. And during this time, there were several children there that were experiencing obvious dehydration, and while I was there one of the children died and the other one was on her way out of life. And it was at that moment where I realized the critical importance of water and how I felt it touched my inner being. It touched my core. I knew I had to become a soldier for water, a champion for water.

The second event that confirmed my experience and confirmed my intent to be a champion for water was I traveled to Peru when I worked with the World Bank Water and Sanitation Program, and I got a chance to be in a village the very first time that the village got water. Prior to that, the women would travel several miles. You've heard the stories about women carrying fifty gallons of water for one or two miles back to the village just to be able to cook or to wash your hands or wash clothes. And I was physically there the moment this village got water. And I remember that moment so well. It was something that touched me to my core and yet again confirming the fact that I needed to become a champion for water.

And so here I am today working as a water sector communication professional. I am an accredited business communication professional with a specialized expertise in water, and I help global organizations, engineering firms, water tech companies and others in the U.S. and international arena on water issues.

Dave: Those sound like some very powerful experiences that you had in Senegal and Peru and the other thirty-two countries to which you traveled internationally - just very interesting stories. So you're an expert in water utilities and their communications. Let's talk a little about what your perceptions are of how water utility communications are at present and where you think they ought to be going. Can you talk a little about that?

Donna: Sure. You know I did a deep dive in the evaluation of the sector in preparing for a project that I was working on called The Activate Program, where I looked at water technologies, I evaluated the entire commercialization process. And during this time, I was able to look at even how utilities were adopting water technologies and attended meetings on the small water utilities side and did research about large utilities. And I started looking at specific documents, sort of from a historical perspective to find out how long communication and the importance of it for water utilities has been discussed. And so from an industry perspective, what I learned was that in the mid-80s the national academies challenged the EPA to start focusing on communication with a particular emphasis on crisis communication or communication for crisis situations. There was a document that came out in 2004, which sort of was the tie-in to the initial research in the '80s that looked at the future of water utilities and how they were going to attach themselves to at least nine attributes of excellence that would position the water utility to excel. And within that context, communication was one of the attributes, and the document maintained that utilities need to focus on strong internal and external communication and make sure that those who were delivering it were also skilled in the process.

2004940378_1



And then recently, if you look at The Water Environment Federation's energy road map, it was a document that was a result of forty water communication professionals that came together to discuss the utility of the future. There's been a lot written in the last twelve months about the utility of the future, but this particular document, which I believe came out about a year or year-and-a-half ago, identified several areas, one of which was communication. So if you look at the historical evidence, communication has been brought up, talked about, addressed and listed in the top things that a utility needs to do. And while I would report that there are pockets of very positive activity, DC Water, for an example, is one utility that is a champion for water. They have a lot of external affair activities that are really top-notch. And there are pockets around the U.S. where you can find that utilities are starting to sort of beat the drum for what they are doing.

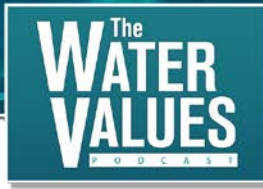
And I think that there's definitely a growth area for a utility to represent both their reputation and their brand. What I'm finding now is that the media typically reports on the water main breaks. They typically report on the bad news. So if you only hear bad news about a utility, the public's impression is not going to be fully informed about the broader story of the utility. So to answer your question, I think that as the utilities are considering transformation in their operations to be able to move to a utility of the future, I would propose that they also start to examine their communication operations portfolio because it is an important asset in their broader asset management discussions.

Dave: Right. When I first started practicing law, one of the things that folks said was, "Hey, stay out of the news and keep your head down, that's a good thing." I think the thought process there was that any publicity might bring scrutiny down on the utility's operation, whether that's from the media or the regulators. And I think over the last fifteen years, I've seen a gradual erosion of that mindset. I agree with you that communications are so important. And hopefully that mindset of "just stay out of the papers and everything will be ok," hopefully that's going away for good. Could you tell us your perspective - on you brought up DC Water - how has this transformation from utilities being passive on the communication front to being more active - How has the transformation gone, from being relatively silent to being storytellers about water?

Donna: I'm not a DC Water representative. I can only give you what I've learned through the process of meeting the leaders and having sit down coffees with several of the staff there and also seeing them give presentations at various events. But I certainly keep my eyes on DC Water for a number of reasons. I think that first and foremost, they have a champion for water and that is the leader of the organization. He has really stepped up to the plate for being a thought leader on water issues and on engaging with the public.

I keep thinking about how, in some places, people build fences around their house, around their yard to keep people out. And one of the terms we hear quite often in the industry is "inside the fence" and "outside the fence." What I think has happened with DC Water is that George Hawkins has torn down the fence, and he has made the public and the customer-stakeholder a

2004940378_1



very strong part of the equation of the success of his utility. And I think that first and foremost, having a leader that's going to step out and deal with those questions and deal with those issues that a water utility is going to face over and over again.

And I would say that I was actually was inspired by one of George's presentations at the event put on by Value of Water Coalition recently. It was on aging infrastructure in DC, and he was one of the presenters. And there were a number of presenters in front of the room and he gave his presentation and started off with a story. And on my train ride home, I could recall the details of the story, and then he talked about the issue. It's like he hooked me with storytelling.

And so I think that a key part of being able to engage the public is to reduce the engineering terms to stories that people can understand. This is a story about a person's basement overflowing with sewage, and the reason it happened is because we have issues with pipes that are too old and let me tell you how we got there. And so he artfully weaves in the engineering facts with personal stories, and you're able to have these "hangers" if you will, on the story, and then "Oh, by the way, you're going to remember that the pipes are old, and you need to fix them."

Dave: I agree with you. I think he's done a phenomenal job, and storytelling is just central to getting people hooked, as you said. You brought up the story of say flooded basements with backed-up sewage. And that kind of brings us into the One Water concept. We're talking about the water utility, but the sewage is backing up and when we talk about these utilities, the water and sewer utility together, brings to my mind the One Water concept. How is storytelling advancing that One Water concept?

Donna: That's a critical question. One thing that did come to mind, sort of, in answering your previous question is there are other examples like in Cincinnati or Milwaukee or in Orange County. There are some other examples. I could probably do an entire interview about the good things that water utilities are doing. I don't want to miss out on that opportunity to say that Cincinnati has an awesome example where they're focusing on green infrastructure and changing the way they do their capital projects.

So I would say that to answer your question about the One Water communication, that there is a move within the industry for something called "one-water" management. And the one-water management is looking at water as water. Water is water, whether it's waste water, storm water, resource water, anything. It's all One Water, and so as I was reading an article online by Mark Chevalier talking about the One Water concept and then looking at Ben Grumbles, who is the head of the U.S. Water Alliance and also the project manager for the Value of Water Coalition. He's been doing a lot of thought leadership on One Water management. I started thinking about if the industry were moving towards One Water management, and it is essential for communication, especially if we're going to deem utilities as a business, that communication is

2004940378_1



going to follow with One Water communication. That would be an important adjunct and complement to One Water management.

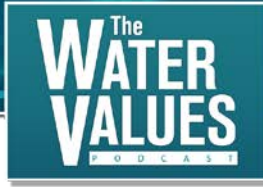
Through this process, I started looking at what are the things that we could do to complement the One Water management and I started looking at potentially how we could standardize visual communication about water. I did some research about the industry's use of color palette. If you're an electrician for an example, you know that certain colors mean certain things. If a wire is wrapped in red, you know what that means. I'm not an electrician and I don't propose to know all the colors they use, but I do know the electrical field has a good use of colors to understand sort of what's happening in the field.

And so I started looking at also Rear Admiral Francis Beaufort who put together the Beaufort Wind Scale. So I started studying the way that he named wind to try and get an understanding of how he sought to standardize the way that people viewed wind, how they understood sort of, how fast it was going. And he set up this scale to help to standardize it because prior to that, there was this profusion of scales that caused a lot of confusion and inaccurate measurement communication about wind.

So I looked at how he did that and started thinking about how can we use language, icons and color to help to standardize communication about water. And one of the things that I came across was way back, I think it was in the '90s, where the story of purple pipes came about in Orange County, where they were looking at a different color pipe to pipe reclaimed water. They actually chose a color, and it was Pantone 512. And that particular color was supposed to be the color used for reclaimed pipes.

As I was doing research on that, I found an infographic. And it was done by a major organization - no names - and that particular infographic had a purple pipe going into the house, into the sink, into the bathroom, and into the basement where potable water was supposed to be going. The purple pipe was shown as going into a place where it shouldn't have been.

So it made me think, "we really need to standardize." If we're going to improve communication, if we show people that reclaimed water is going inside a house, that's really the wrong message. It's an inaccurate message. So I started to dig up this story about the purple pipes and use that to jump off into creating the Roa Conceptual Model for water communication. I thought it was the right thing to do. I think in general, we have an affinity towards categorization and the interest in using colors to help to codify what we do. And if you look way back to the Roman period and the Middle Ages when the Church was using color for symbolic purposes, the color of the vestment all the way to any other color schemes that we have. I thought, "Ok, why not do this for water?"



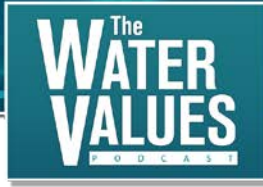
In doing this exercise, what I came to learn was, if I were going to create a color palette, and surely, accurately representing reclaimed water, which is the Pantone 512, that I needed to put together an entire framework that if one were interested in communicating, for example, on the treatment of water, that I could actually apply that color palette within the context of a model that would show in very simplistic terms how water is treated. And one of the key messages in the model is that water is water. Whether it is ground water, surface water, brackish water, sea water, storm water, it's all water. But within this context, I created very specific icons. So we've got color visually connected to each type of water and then we have an icon for each one of them that undergoes a specific treatment that yields a specific type of water. Again, a set of colors, a set of icons and then it goes through to become used water or asset water.

And one of the things I was looking at with this terminology, there was a conference, an international conference, that requested it attendees to take a survey about changing the language of water. So I decided I was going to evaluate that survey and see if I could learn anything from it as I was developing this model. And one of the interesting points was that the survey gave options for changes, but they were sometimes a bit more complicated than the original word.

So what I tried to do with this was to also create the use of simplistic terms so that anyone could understand this model. So if you have industry that used water and it became dirty, it was called asset water. And the reason it's called asset water is that we can pull assets from the water. In the industry it's called waste water, but the reality is it is not waste because part of this process required that I do research on what is really happening in resource recovery? It's everything from the ones we know, nitrogen, phosphorus, silver, cadmium, all the way to recent developments in thermoplastics, bio-plastics, duckweed, ash, magnesium, gold, and the list goes on.

So from the public's perspective, if we want to raise the profile of resource recovery, we can't say that it's waste water. If water is water, then if something goes into it, it now becomes water that has assets that we can take away. It's the carrier now of something that is potentially good. We extract it through the treatment process. And we get organics. We get nutrients. We get metals. We get energy. And so why not call it asset water? It's got assets we can pull off of it. Some of it obviously still needs to go under treatment. I am not sitting here telling you that I am an engineer and I can explain all of the technical aspects of the product, of the project or the process, but what I am telling you is I wanted to come up with a model that I could put on the table with a group of sixth graders and have them explain the model to me without any prompting. That was my goal.

Dave: That's fascinating. I'm of the same mindset as you. I've really not liked the term waste water, and so calling it asset water is really genius to make us change our mindset about how that water is viewed. When did you come up with the Roa Conceptual Model. What's the timeframe we're talking about here?



Donna: I've been working on it for a couple years. I think the genesis of the idea came when I was in the Activate Program studying water technology commercialization. I started stirring about this idea about resource recovery, too. And just felt like I needed to put something together. You're driven with an idea and you feel like you need to make it happen and that you were given this idea. I kind of joke around, and I say that I firmly believe that the universe gives the same idea to more than one person because the universe wants that idea implemented.

And so I count myself as an implementer. If I get an idea, then it's my responsibility to carry it through, and I started doing really strong research on this.

I guess one of the things, too, on resource recovery that's inspiring is that I was at the inaugural opening of the WEFTEC Innovation Showcase and Pavilion where Cordell Samuels gave a presentation. And he was talking about WEF's role in changing the paradigm and the discussion on resource recovery. And I'll never forget what he said and that emphasis on changing the language to resource recovery played into my setting up a color palette item.

If you see the Roa Conceptual Model, there is an icon and a color chip for resource recovery. Because I think that if we can relate the recycling icon, the development of that and the use of that and the familiarity of that within society, what I would propose, and if I had five other Donnas sitting next to me, I would tell one of them "raise the profile for resource recovery, and let's get this icon out into the public's view so they come to understand that we can pull assets from water that's been used, in very simplest terms, and that we know and understand resource recovery, and there is an icon that represents that process."

Dave: Interesting stuff. How has it been received? What stage is it in right now?

Donna: So I have pitched it to a number of journal articles. I think there's going to be one coming out in the Fall. I am still waiting for the confirmation. I have it posted - a lot of stories about it - on my website, donnavincentroa.com. And also some articles about it on Speaking Up About Water, which is my blog where I focus on a number of industry issues, many relating to water utilities and water communication globally.

Dave: Ok. Let's get back in and talk about some of the examples from around the country that you mentioned earlier. You brought up Cincinnati and Milwaukee. You said Cincinnati had a lot of green infrastructure. Can you talk about some of the other examples of what some of these cities are doing in the story telling they're wrapping around their water projects?

Donna: Yeah. I think with Cincinnati, that's a very good case study. I know that Tony Parrott is another champion that I would certainly put right up there in the category with George Hawkins. One of the things that they've done is take a really close look at the way that their water and sewer assets are contributing to the community. They look at regulatory requirements as a sort of

2004940378_1



piece of the equation, but I think that their shift in bringing the sustainable above-ground investment to the community has made the model a bit different.

I think that like all the other water utilities across the country, they face problems with having to communicate the value of water investment. And so when they're doing things for the community, there's some visible evidence of the things they are doing, I think it changes the whole water dynamic for a community.

One of the examples that Tony would provide is that when there was a spill in the Elk River upstream in West Virginia, I don't know if you remember that, but it was a spill that had the potential of negatively effecting the water delivery in Cincinnati and because they had planned for this kind of event, they were able to eliminate any kind of impact to their drinking water system. They were able to close off a few pipes or whatever valves to keep the bad water from coming in. They let it just pass down the river.

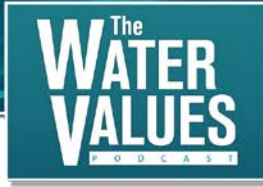
And there's another activity, while I'm sure Tony can provide additional details, and if I could nominate someone to interview, I think he's another really good candidate for you, but he works in partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development so that the investments they are making in infrastructure are going to have a really positive impact on their communities. So I think utilities focusing on social outcomes and impacts on the communities are going to be an important part of being able to bring communities into the fold, sort of tearing down the fence, if you will.

Dave: Sure, and that brings up an interesting point about strategies for communicating about water. I really like the idea of getting social involvement, the community building type avenue for getting those communications out. What are some of the other strategies that you see utilities use?

Donna: You know, I'm actually on the edge of doing a major evaluation of water utilities, both public and private. I'm reviewing the minutes of that particular project right now. I'm looking at things happening inside the fence, outside the fence, directly with the customers with sustainability and with brand.

So looking at just the whole customer service operation, often times one might not consider that as part of the strategic communication portfolio, I think that there are opportunities within the context of customer communication whether it's to take the activity to another level using technology or actually taking a step back and evaluating the processes of customer service. What's going on? How has it happened? What are your current channels of communication? Where can you improve? How can employees be trained differently? Because I think every single customer encounter is an opportunity to reinforce both the reputation and the brand of the utility, but also, it's like a moment for doing good.

2004940378_1



When utilities are positioned in the customer service area to complement all the other things that are going on, whether it's sustainability or brand or community education, that it all works together into this One Water communication activity. And that we really have to look at the entire utility as an ambassador for the product that it delivers. It's everything from "do we use appropriate messaging on the door handles?" "Do we need to brand the utility?" "Does the utility need a logo?" "How many of our business communication practices do we need to embed into the utility to make sure that all the work that they're doing on the technical side is sort of going to be known by the community?" And I think if you look at some of the specific areas, one would be brand and brand management of the utility. I think both in public and private settings that utilities have an opportunity to brand themselves.

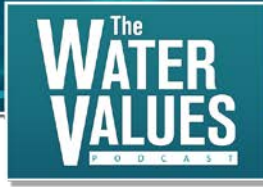
Utilities are a business. I think that that is one fact we can never forget. Whether they're a public utility or a private utility, they are a business. And businesses have a brand whether they like it or not. If they sit and try to manage the brand from the inside and work towards improving the brand, that will bode well for what happens in the future with customer relationships. So there's brand and brand management for utilities, the customer service communication that I've already mentioned, there's the usual external affairs, the customer outreach, the customer education, the customer engagement. And I think that mainstream sustainability is another utility of the future area that I think communication can also play a role, because within the context of those achievements for sustainability, business communication needs to capture that either through the annual sustainability reporting or a very specific way of knowledge management to document and disseminate sustainability achievements.

And I think that utilities are positioning themselves and there is clear evidence that there's a trend towards utilities becoming recognized as sustainability leaders. That is something that they've been doing all along. If you were to use the green-washing, green-blushing continuum, I think utilities are really the first green business in our nation. They were focused on these kinds of issues from the very beginning - changing the way sanitation happened in the U.S. for example. That's a very green activity. It wasn't called green back then, but water utilities are really on the cutting edge of sustainability, and I think that as they move toward tenets of the utility of the future, the reporting of the sustainability and accomplishments and achievements are going to be equally as important.

And then I think another area, I call it the executive services area. We cannot underestimate the power of a utility leader who is front and center. I think that's the top of the game here and that we need to work in the area of business communication to make sure that there is that thought leadership and that there is that trained professional who can talk his or her three or four messages. And they know about brand, brand building, brand management.

So I see some really positive things happening. And the evidence of agencies, both public and private, that are moving toward stronger engagement with all of their stakeholders, from the

2004940378_1



board to the consumer and everybody in-between. I think it's an exciting time for the industry. It's one of the reasons why I put together this project called *The Value of Water: A Compendium of Essays by Smart CEOs* is that I would hear the Tony Parrotts of the world or the George Hawkins of the world telling me stories, and I thought ok, this is the perfect time to begin to document and catalog these things that are happening as it relates to the value of water with a particular emphasis on water utilities.

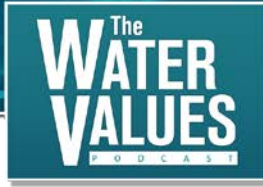
Dave: Right. I whole-heartedly agree with you. I think utilities have a great story to tell. It's just a matter of getting out there and telling it in the right way. For folks like George Hawkins and Tony Parrott, we just need lots more of those folks out there. There's a lot of them out there that we don't know about yet. They just, they're in the process of developing. But I agree with you. Tell us a little more about this book you mentioned, *The Value of Water*.

Donna: Yeah. We're right in the middle of this. I put together a proposal quite a while back and have been looking for the right partner to be able to create this book. It is called *The Value of Water: A Compendium of Essays by Smart CEOs*, and my original vision for this was for us to look at all the different aspects of the value of water. Everything from the technical side of it to the personal side and document specific CEOs' insights on the value of water and have them share with us the complex issues that they are facing within the context of their organizations because I think it's important for us to step back and take a moment that we're in a position to inform the conversation about water's future for business. And so it was pretty much an easy sell because I think those who said yes to the project, certainly have a role to play in showcasing the value of water leadership and how when we value water, how it affects business performance. And they are able to provide very specific lessons learned, best practices, calls to action. I think the overarching purpose of the book is that with the sharing of these perspectives about water that we're going to convince the reader that all of us need to be stewards of water and that as we read this kind of information, our consciousness about the value of water can change.

Dave: Well, that sounds like a great book. I can't wait until it comes out. Well, we are coming up against our time limit here, and Donna, you've done a great job, I think, telling us about all these different and fascinating areas of communications in the water industry, but where can folks go if they would like to find out more about you and your company?

Donna: I'm on LinkedIn. I'd love to connect with any listener if you've heard the podcast today, and you want to connect with me, please send me a note on LinkedIn. I am the author and founder of the blog speakingupaboutwater.com. It's also on donnavincentroa.com/blog; and Vincent Roa Group is my company. It's a business communication firm that focuses on environmental issues with a specific emphasis on water. And in addition to that, if you are looking for another sort of broad set of articles, I have, I think, around fourteen or fifteen articles on Water Online. It's a very strong industry publication. You can sort of search my name on there and see additional information. And then, in the coming months, you can hear me speak.

2004940378_1



I'll be at the One Water Leadership Summit put on by the U.S. Water Alliance and other organizations. I'll be attending the World Water Summit being put on by The Economist. So you know, say hello if you see me out. I'll probably be carrying copies of my book.

Dave: Well, great. Well, Donna, thanks so much for coming on today. I think you've been terrific and certainly wish you the best of luck with the release of *The Value of Water* and your other water communications. So thanks again.

Donna: Thank you. I appreciate the time and look forward to connecting again soon.

Dave: You bet. We'll talk to you soon, Donna. Bye.

Donna: Bye.

Dave: That was my interview with Donna Vincent Roa. She was fantastic, wasn't she?

A couple takeaways for you. First, I thought renaming wastewater to asset water or resource water is a terrific idea to get people to think differently about that water. Many people in the industry know that energy and resource extraction can come from what's commonly called wastewater, but the general public likely does not know. Renaming it asset water or resource water could really help further the public's understanding of the water cycle.

A second takeaway is the Roa Conceptual Model. This is a very interesting tool that I think can be used to educate the public about water and its many forms and categories. I'm very interested to see how it gets implemented on a broader scale.

Well, you can check the Show Notes out for this session at <http://thewatervalues.com/pod27>. And please don't be bashful in letting me know what interested you about the interview by leaving a comment on the Show Notes or by emailing me at david@thewatervalues.com. You can also tweet at me @DTM1993. And don't forget to rate and review the podcast on iTunes, Stitcher and other podcast directories and don't forget to tell your friends and colleagues about the podcast and to sign up for The Water Values Newsletter, which can be done at <http://thewatervalues.com>.

In closing, please remember to keep the core message of The Water Values Podcast in mind as you go about your daily business. Water is our most valuable resource. So please join me by going out into the world and acting like it.

2004940378_1



Outro: You've been listening to The Water Values Podcast. Thank you for spending some of your day with my dad and me.

Dave: Thank you for tuning in to the disclaimer. I'm a lawyer licensed in Colorado and Indiana. And nothing in this podcast should be taken as providing legal advice or as establishing an attorney-client relationship with you or with anyone else. Additionally, nothing in this podcast should be considered a solicitation for professional employment. I'm just a lawyer that finds water issues interesting and that believes greater public education is needed about water issues. And that includes enhancing my own education about water issues because no one knows everything about water.

2004940378_1