



Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter

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## A Foreword by Jimmy Carter

**C**lean water is a basic human right. Without it, the other rights may not even matter. Human societies cannot be healthy, prosperous and just without adequate supplies of clean water. What could be a more basic right than clean water?

*It has been said that we are what we eat, but it might be more accurate to say that we are what we drink. Our bodies are 70% water; our brains are 95% water. Human beings can survive up to a month without food but not more than a few days without water.*

*In 1972, when Congress passed the Clean Water Act, I was serving as Governor of Georgia. I understood the importance of water issues and already had stopped a number of misguided water development projects within the state. I saw the passage of the Clean Water Act as an important step forward in protecting and restoring the health of our nation's rivers.*

*The United States has not always set the best examples in terms of water resource protection and management. In fact, over the past 200 years we have degraded thousands of rivers, lakes and streams to the point that they are no longer capable of supporting their native life or the basic uses humans expect of them.*

*However, the United States has set some very important and very good examples. Of these, none has been more important than the passage of the Clean Water Act.*

*Prior to the passage of this landmark legislation, our national water pollution control policy had been based on the belief that pollution was a necessary evil – an inevitable byproduct of economic development. Many assumed that to be more prosperous, we simply had to put up with more pollution. (If it were as simple as that, the most polluted places would also be the most prosperous. This has never been true, and never will be.)*

*Until 1972, each state was left to determine how best to “balance” pollution control with other concerns. There were no minimum discharge standards that applied across the nation. Consequently, some polluting industries would “shop” across state lines for the most lenient discharge standards they could find. Some states would actually compete for these industries by lowering their standards, while others cried out for a more level playing field. All eleven paper pulp mill owners threatened to leave Georgia unless I agreed to relax our standards, but they backed down when we were resolute.*

*This poor system initiated and perpetuated a race to the bottom – and led inevitably to the appalling water quality problems of the 1960s. Thousands of waters, including most of those in populous or heavily industrialized areas, were unfit for human contact and unable to support their native life. When Ohio's Cuyahoga River actually caught fire in Cleveland in the summer of 1969, a transfixed nation asked how this could be possible, less than a month from the day we took our first steps on the moon.*

*Many communities burdened with the “necessary byproduct of economic progress” saw their economies grind to a halt. And many polluted communities experienced public health problems that no amount of economic progress could have justified.*

*The American people demanded action. Congress responded in 1972 by overhauling the nation’s water pollution control law with enough bipartisan strength to override the anticipated presidential veto. The new law stood the old, flawed policy on its head.*


*The premise underlying the Clean Water Act was that pollution by definition was harmful. From 1972 forward, new pollution was to be avoided wherever possible and minimized in any case. Existing water pollution was to be identified and reduced as quickly as possible, and then steadily reduced further over time. Direct pollution discharges were simply illegal unless enforceable permits regulated their concentrations and amounts. Industrial and municipal sewage discharges were subject to new national standards. “Fishable/swimmable” water quality was to be protected where it already existed, and was to be attained as quickly as possible wherever else it was achievable. In the realm of environmental quality and human health, these were notions as important – and as revolutionary for their time – as those underlying the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution or the Emancipation Proclamation.*

*In the next few years, including those during which I served as President, we took the first major steps in the right direction. We made tremendous progress in reducing existing direct industrial and municipal sources of pollution. Many streams and lakes that had been unfit for swimming, fishing or drinking were restored. The economic benefits alone were incalculable. They continue to accrue to this day, because many waters that had been liabilities to their communities quickly became tremendous assets.*


*Still, however, the ultimate goals of the Clean Water Act remain distant. Because not all of the Act’s provisions have been faithfully implemented, new pollution has simply replaced old pollution in many waters. At least as troubling, many formerly high quality waters have been degraded and are unfit for swimming, fishing or drinking. Even more waters fail to support their full ecological functions.*

*The Clean Water Act, in and of itself, doesn’t ensure clean water any more than the Civil Rights Act guarantees full civil rights. Both depend on federal and state governments committed to them. Even more importantly, both depend on an informed, involved, committed and courageous citizenry. When people don’t speak up and organize for clean water, it cannot be guaranteed – even by the most progressive state and federal agencies working under the most enlightened administrations.*

*The Clean Water Act’s provisions for public involvement are arguably its most important. They offer a clear framework for direct citizen involvement in nearly all important water quality decisions, including a state’s general minimum standards, goals for every waterbody, limits on existing effluents, and whether and how to allow new discharges. In fact, there may be no law in any land that allows such a degree of state and local public involvement in its interpretation and implementation – or that depends so completely on it. Each American can and should have a say in how goals and limits are set for waters in their area.*



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**This “Owner’s Manual” is our guide to personal involvement in the most important decisions about our rivers, streams, wetlands, lakes and estuaries.**

*That is where this handbook comes in. There are other manuals for lawyers, scientists and regulators. This one is for people like you and me – people who care enough about their waters to take personal action to protect and restore them. You and I own our waters, and we own the Clean Water Act. This “Owner’s Manual” is our guide to personal involvement in the most important decisions about our rivers, streams, wetlands, lakes and estuaries.*

*River Network is performing a vital service by updating, re-publishing and continuing to distribute this important handbook. For over seventeen years, this national non-profit organization has been helping citizens organize to protect rivers and their watersheds. River Network cooperates with hundreds of grassroots organizations around the country to improve the quantity and quality of freshwater that supports all life. The women and men who make up these groups are the unsung heroes of America’s rivers. I salute them and River Network for their work, their courage and their sacrifice.*

*This handbook illustrates the sections of the Clean Water Act that are most effective in dealing with the particular problems river protectors face in each region of our country. It presents actual case studies that show how the Act can be used successfully. Most importantly, it extracts from thousands of pages of complex rules and regulations the simple things each of us can do to advocate successfully for cleaner water.*

*During my term as President of the United States, we nearly doubled the size of the federal Wild and Scenic River System. We were able to slow down, if not halt completely, the destructive trend in building inappropriate dams and other water development projects harmful to the health of rivers. Just as importantly, we made tremendous progress in addressing our pollution problems under the framework of the still-young Clean Water Act.*

*I left the presidency as I had entered it, with a deep love for flowing waters. I also re-entered private life with a greater understanding of the necessity for direct citizen action and participation in our environmental conservation efforts.*

*Please read this manual carefully. Please get involved in making the Clean Water Act work properly in your area. And please promote river conservation by supporting the local, state and national organizations of your choice.*



*Jimmy Carter served as Governor of Georgia from 1971 to 1975, and as the thirty-ninth President of the United States from 1977 to 1981. Since 1981 he and his wife Rosalynn have worked tirelessly for peace, democracy, human rights, and economic and social development. In 2002 he was awarded the Nobel Peace prize.*