

July 25, 1998.

Walker Creek Declaration

The following is the founding statement of Living Rivers: The International Coalition for the Restoration of Rivers and Communities Affected by Dams. See cover story for more information about this new coalition.

WHEREAS:

Free flowing, living rivers are an essential, life giving feature of our natural and human environment. They fulfill a multitude of ecological, economic, spiritual, cultural and aesthetic needs and wants.

World wide, these invaluable rivers are now degraded by hundreds of thousands of dams, which have flooded huge areas of the worlds most beautiful and ecologically rich habitats and the homes and lands of tens of millions of people. Dams have impoverished countless communities which were dependent on the bounty of free-flowing rivers and riverside lands, and endangered public health.

Dams have blocked flows of nutrients and sediments and the passage of fish and other aquatic life-forms. Dams have contaminated river water. Dams have eliminated essential natural flooding regimes thereby degrading the ecosystems, farmlands and fisheries which depend on floods. And dams have caused the decline and extinction of riverine species and the ecological degradation of estuaries and coastlines.

Many dams provide services for society, including the generation of electricity, the storage and diversion of water, flood protection, navigation and flat-water recreation. But we now know that these services come at a high economic, ecological and social cost and often can be met in other less damaging ways. We also have learned that costs and benefits of dams are unequally shared those who reap the rewards are rarely those who must bear the costs.

After decades of experience, we now know that the promised benefits of many dam projects have never been realized, and their adverse effects are more serious than predicted. Trying to recreate artificially the complex

natural cycles and functions of undammed rivers has proven to be far more difficult than was once thought. Efforts to mitigate the adverse effects of dams have often proven expensive and ineffective.

The knowledge learned over the past decades has included social and environmental impact assessments, access to information, public participation in decision making, and periodic reevaluation of a dam's impacts and operations. Many existing dams would never have been built if they had had to comply with current best practice planning principles, procedures and standards. Some are illegal because they were constructed in violation of existing laws, or because required environmentally mitigation and social compensation measures were never implemented.

Many dams are now obsolete. Many have reached the end of their functional life span and no longer serve a purpose that justifies their negative impacts. Many are unsafe, threatening the lives of millions of people, as well as property, fish and wildlife.

For many dams the cost of maintenance and of environmental and social mitigation exceeds the benefits to be gained from dam operation. The cost of removing dams is in many cases proving less than the cost of continuing to operate them, even without taking full account of the social and ecological benefits of dam removal.

A movement is now growing around the world which recognizes the vital importance of living rivers. People are calling for major changes in the operating patterns of dams to lessen their negative impacts, the decommissioning and removal of obsolete and dangerous dams, the restoration of rivers and the provision of reparations for past damages suffered by riverine communities affected by dams.

THEREFORE:

We now establish Living Rivers, an international coalition for the restoration of rivers and communities affected by dams, by means of dam reoperation, decommissioning or removal.

Independent and transparent evaluations must be carried out periodically to identify which dams should continue in operation, which should have their operations altered to mitigate adverse impacts, and which should be decommissioned or removed. The continued existence and operation of individual dams must be justified on the grounds of ecological and social impacts, economics and safety.

Decommissioning plans must be prepared for all dams, whether existing, planned or under construction. These plans should include dam removal and river, reservoir zone and flood-plain restoration. The plans should also include mechanisms for raising the funds needed to pay for decommissioning.

Dam owners and the beneficiaries of dams must be held responsible for the costs of mitigating the impacts of their continuing operation, of reparations for past damages, and where relevant of decommissioning or removing the dams. Funding mechanisms must be established to pay for decommissioning abandoned dams or for dams where the owner has insufficient financial resources. International agencies which have financed dams should share the responsibility for their decommissioning or removal.

Rigorous dam safety standards must be developed and enforced, including the preparation and publication of flood inundation maps and emergency evacuation plans, and the purchase of liability insurance. The safety records of dams must be made public. The costs of implementing improved dam safety standards should be borne by dam owners and beneficiaries and where relevant, international funding agencies.

Scientific, engineering and sociological research and education on dam decommissioning must be promoted by governments and dam agencies.

Watershed management and energy plans must be developed in a participatory and transparent manner. Watershed management plans should integrate sustainable agriculture and fisheries, urban planning, flood management, water supply and environmental restoration. Regional energy services plans should incorporate demand-side management and the most environmentally benign and cost-effective forms of generation.

Dams have had huge negative impacts on rivers and river communities- removing dams is an economically, technically, socially and environmentally viable and sensible option for reversing these impacts and restoring living rivers. Investment in living river systems will produce substantial benefits for our human and natural communities, today and tomorrow.

Let our rivers live!

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We endorse and agree with the above. If you also endorse this please write to us.

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