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### The Water Crisis in California

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## INTERVIEW

# The Water Crisis in California

## An Interview with Charlie Toledo

PATRICIA DAMERY



Patricia Damery and Charlie Toledo on a bridge overlooking the Napa River  
(Photo courtesy of Donald Harms.)

Charlie Toledo, Executive Director of the Suscol Intertribal Council in Napa, California, helped author the Watershed Development plan for Napa County in its seminal years, 1992–1995, and more recently serves on the State Low Income Oversight Board, a committee of the California Public Utilities Commission. In this interview, she and I discuss current water legislation in California in the light of Native American wisdom.

**PATRICIA DAMERY (PD):** We have a water bond on the ballot in California in the November 2014 election, and there are three state groundwater monitoring laws that are going to go into

effect January 1, 2015. Would you give us some of your thoughts about these plans and about what is being done?

**CHARLIE TOLEDO (CT):** I think what is being done, and what indigenous people would like to see being done, are two different things. What's changing that's good for native elders and native people like myself is that finally we are taking a hard look at the massive, massive amounts of water from Northern California being transferred to Central and Southern California. That put things off balance. Water is a living being. Where water goes, what it does when it falls from the sky and rolls down the creeks, down the mountains from the creeks to the river, the river to the sea: all of that is part of that continuum of a healthy body.

Looking at water as the sacred body—that is what indigenous people are putting out right now. Like a campaign, really. In advertising you have to get a little jingle that you have to repeat over and over. Like “Water is sacred. Water is sacred.” It is not a commodity. It should not and cannot be bought and sold.

So looking at water as sacred: when I look at the water bond [Proposition 1], some of those things in the proposition are really good, like the restoration of watersheds and regional water management, storm management, and ground water management. But the damming, storing, or transporting of water is harmful. [One-third of the bond money could be used for damming and transporting water.] What's happening now is the end result of a hundred years of mismanagement. We created a system that was very brilliant. It's amazing that in the 1800s they engineered this project to store water and then transport it hundreds of miles into desert areas. But, it's not sustainable.

**PD:** You have been working with Watershed Development for many years. Could you tell us about your beginnings and what you have learned?

**CT:** I started working with Watershed Development around 1992–1993 as the spokesperson representing Suscol Intertribal Council. Initially, the issue was flood control in Napa County. The Army Corps of Engineers wanted to cement the whole Napa River like the Los Angeles River. The Friends of the River, headed by Judith Sears, was fighting against that. She actually won that argument, and they then developed a watershed evaluation plan. It was a three-year plan. We worked with all the county supervisors, all the mayors, all of the environmental groups, of which at that time there were a very few. We had monthly meetings and basically came up with a watershed plan that did not involve cement in the waterway. That became the groundwork for what we called “watershed management.” The county called it “flood control.” We said flood control was a misnomer—because when it's flooding, it's not in control.

I was bringing up points that nobody else was bringing up. I was bringing up the point of riparian corridor and the vineyards. Many vineyards are running their lines perpendicular to the river so they create erosion paths directly into river and waterways. The riparian corridor was the biggest thing that was being ignored. At the end of that watershed plan, there was supposed to be a 12-foot riparian corridor. I said 12 feet wasn't enough. I was really pushing for 21 feet along the

whole length of the Napa River on both sides from the southern end below Napa Junior College north to Calistoga.

Of course, when it got to implementation, I was long gone and the scientists and engineers came in. Unfortunately, when the public went away, what the city did was what they said they would not do: they let the riparian corridor get down to 12 feet, and in some places, 2 feet. I said, “Two feet is not a riparian corridor! That’s one tree! That’s not even the canopy of one tree.” This is one of our big mistakes in Napa County and the world: not honoring that riparian corridor. There are big hunks of Napa Valley going into the river with every flood, at the rate of 6 to 7 feet a year.

The Napa County Watershed plan actually created “support groups” for every watershed. They identified the residents who lived in those watersheds, which is still a collective action—a lot like a neighborhood watch, only it’s a watershed watch. The people meet annually. That model of public input, working in a public forum for years, developing and then implementing the plan, has become a national model. Napa actually established that model.

**PD:** You talk about the importance of the riparian corridor. Could you say what you mean by *riparian corridor*?

**CT:** That’s the trees and bushes that grow along the river that hold and stabilize the bank and shade the waterways for fish habitat and reduce evaporation. Even if the river floods, the bank still holds when the corridor is wide enough. Without a riparian corridor, banks erode. That’s what’s happening in Napa Valley now.

What some counties like Monterey County are doing, is to go too far the other way. They’ve left the riparian corridor, the bushes and trees, but you can’t touch them. That’s again imagining that in pre-European time, it was a wilderness, but it wasn’t a wilderness. It was a managed agricultural base, managed by indigenous peoples.

**PD:** How did they manage the trees and plants?

**CT:** What native people did was leave the big trees and hardwood trees. The riparian corridor would have been very intact. The willow would be harvested annually. The sedge would be harvested annually, which means it would be trimmed and cut back. It wouldn’t get all tangled and overgrown. The blackberries would be harvested and picked. The sedges and the real big perennial grasses would be burnt through every three years so there wouldn’t be all the buildup. The burns reduced mice, ticks, and mosquitoes. A person and wildlife could access the banks of the river, and the health of desired trees, food, and basketry plants was promoted.

When you do what Monterey County has done, leave it, even the wild animals can’t get to the water, because, it’s all overgrown. It’s all entangled. The blackberries, the willows, the trees, and the brush get all entangled and become inaccessible and usually start clogging up the waterway.

**PD:** Part of the current legislation is the establishment of regional water systems. What does that look like?

**CT:** It would probably be a watershed. I think Napa has seven watersheds. A *watershed* is where the water comes from the sky. Where it runs down the hills. Where it springs from the ground from a spring. What water's available? There are aquifers. Las Vegas has an aquifer. Unfortunately they've just about tapped it out in less than twenty years. They've used water in ways that are not sustainable. So their aquifer is going to be dry. Los Angeles still has aquifers that they can use.

So the watershed is usually based on how the water flows and where it flows.

**PD:** It's not unlike local food supplies.

**CT:** Exactly. Exactly.

**PD:** Yes.

**CT:** The current water management system is now reaching its end point of sustainability. The real solution is that water has to be managed regionally. Just like we were talking about emergencies: emergencies need to be handled by neighbors and neighborhoods in the counties. That is where the state is coming in the discussions that I've been in: that waters have to be managed regionally and not be transported. There is a movement, which I think is important, to access groundwater. To insure the quality and safety of the groundwater that is being used.

One of the things that had never been done in California to date was the registering or monitoring of groundwater for regional sharing. What is unfortunate is California is predominately—three-quarters—desert. The whole Central Valley. The whole southern part of the state is extreme desert. It cannot support the life forms that it has right now. The major cities—Los Angeles, Fresno, Bakersfield—all of those cities, even Santa Barbara, are just out there on a desert rim.

What has happened historically, and must now, is population shifts. People say that can't happen. Humans, as we know it, have been on the earth for a 100,000 years. What we've always done is move around. If there are water shortages, if it gets too cold, if it gets too this, too that, the people move. Globally there has been mass movement to urban areas in the last thirty years.

Most of Los Angeles is less than thirty years old. [In 1900, the Los Angeles census was 102,479. In 2006, the city population was 3,976,071. Los Angeles County's population was 10,245,572, by far the nation's largest county.] Most of Fresno is less than thirty years old. That's not even one person's lifetime. So we can't attach huge emotional attachment to the places. Part of what will happen is that either we're moving the water or we're moving ourselves. Our lives are dependent on water.

The way that we've been using water is unsustainable. We need to cut our water usage by 60 percent. I used to think 40 percent but now I think 60 percent. In January 2014, Governor Brown asked people for voluntary water conservation of 20 percent. Most communities have conserved 6–10 percent. I think we need 60 percent.

My suggestion has been that we have to start shutting the water off. Just have water available two, three hours a day. That will make people realize that our relationship to water in this generation, which I would call from 1850 to 2014, has been out of balance. We think of water as

free. We think of it as this waste product. We allow rainwater to rush down gutters. We've paved over, asphalted areas that used to absorb and conserve water within the earth. All of those practices need to stop.

Just using water to wash off a driveway, to water a golf course: those practices can stop. I think most of us, knowing the severity in coming out of this huge, huge denial that we are in, will really adapt our behavior really quickly, if we can understand the crisis. I think that most people do not understand the crisis level.

**PD:** These are radical ideas.

**CT:** They are.

**PD:** Knowing what you know from having been on various boards: are these ideas going to our committees and lawmakers?

**CT:** I have seen Governor Brown at all these meetings where Native American Elders and multiple generations of Native Americans have gathered. He's right in the middle of it and he's listening. He's scared. He knows. People have been really attacking him. His comment several months ago, probably in the early spring of 2014, "I can't make it rain." He understands it's more than just rain. It's water management.

I sit on a state advisory board that functions as a consumer oversight. When I first started bringing this up three years ago and started asking questions, people were thinking, "No. You're fanatical." Now that's not the thought anymore. People are realizing, "OK. This lady's not crazy. This system is not sustainable." What they are coming to is that water has to be managed regionally and much more conservatively.

One of the things that's come up that I think is really important is a connection one of our brilliant commissioners on the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) has made. She is in the forefront of all of this thinking. She talks about the nexus of power. Energy companies are the main consumer of water in the State of California. Furthermore, the transportation and storage of water is using the most electricity in the State of California.

She calls this the nexus of power. We have to break that nexus of dependency. Stop using so much water to generate electricity. Stop using so much electricity to transport and store water. That's where it comes to a regional idea.

**PD:** A practical question for you. How has your work with water changed your use of water?

**CT:** I've always been really conservative. I was born in New Mexico, and New Mexico has always been in drought. Growing up within a semi-indigenous, agricultural family—and my father and my grandparents were all agricultural people—we were always really careful. We only took one bath a week. We would wash with a washcloth. Our clothes were only washed once a week. I've always kind of lived that way. I take a bath or a shower every other day. I don't always flush my toilet. I try to recycle. I always wish that I would do something more.



**PD:** You talk about the importance of behavioral modification.

**CT:** Yes, Napa County has gotten the watershed down, but I think the biggest thing that I'm pushing is conservation, reuse, recycle.

The replanting of trees, the restoration of the riparian corridor, and conservation. Massive conservation beyond what anybody could imagine.

Then, when I say the thing about having water available two hours in the morning, two hours at night, people from Mexico say, "That's how I grew up. That's how I live." People from Africa say, "Well, we only get it once a day for twenty minutes." Then you use that water for the rest of the day. In places like Bali and throughout Asia, many have to collect their own rainwater. Then once during the dry season, they can have water delivered to their cistern. So whatever water they have, they have to manage that throughout the year. Each person or each family is responsible for his/their own water. That's how it is in most parts of Africa.

*National Geographic* just did an article on water. The whole western part of the United States is in severe drought. These ideas may seem radical, but as time goes by, they'll seem less and less radical, and people will regret how we've wasted water. I think that we can still conserve if we realize . . . well—water is a limited resource. The thought in the legislative battles is we're going to share the water that we have. Really do you want to live and watch everyone else in the state go dry? I think that it does shift our thinking to sharing the water and using much, much less of it than we have used in the past forty or fifty years. We won't bathe in huge bathtubs of water.

**PD:** That sharing is not regional. It's still moving water.

**CT:** That's where I'm thinking that people will start having to move from the cities. Like the earthquake we just experienced: We can talk about the permanence of the material world, but the material world is not permanent. Like the tsunami in Japan: I mean that village was gone, and the people aren't going back there. China, when they had their huge earthquakes. Because they've had their huge migration into cities in the last fifteen years, after a major earthquake a lot of people just went right back to the rural areas. They literally walked right back home.

I think that is what we're going to see. For the last fifty years, we have seen mass migration from rural to urban areas. Most of the population used to live in rural areas everywhere in the world. Now there's been a shift to living in crowded, dense places in the cities. I think that might just reverse. People will leave and live in smaller communities. Or else, like I said, water will just be used very differently.

One of my friends, a Native American Elder, has been working on these water issues with me for the last thirty years. He says now he understands what Mark Twain said, "Whiskey's for drinking and water's for fighting." We're going to move back to the concept that water is very precious. That every drop of rain is very important. Then, along with that, like I said, we can't talk about water without talking about trees. The trees attract the water; they attract the rain; and they hold the water in the soil. There are places like in Findhorn [Scotland] and garden projects in Ireland and England where their gardening practices actually revived water.



Golden Gate Park in San Francisco: That's a place people thought, "No you can't grow in the sand dunes." Doing that really conscious, sustainable farming and gardening that you're familiar with. That you can, actually, create food and water in places where it wasn't. All through the deserts of Afghanistan, Western Asia where there isn't water. The oasis becomes very sacred. People might live on a gallon of water for a week. Which is a much different relationship from what we have now.

And as my elder, Jim Big Bear, always used to say, "The earth gives us everything we need. Our houses, everything we have. Our food, our shelter, our fun, the earth has given us, between the earth and the sun."

The sun is holding us as we're traveling through space. You know, they call it a gravitational field, but in a pantheistic view, that's a love, that's unconditional love.

I think we can do it. As humans we have the capacity to adapt and change. So I think that's what will happen.

**PD:** Again, thank you!

**CHARLIE TOLEDO** is of Towa descendant, native to New Mexico. She is the Executive Director of the Suscol Intertribal Council, a community-based organization (501(c)(3)) incorporated in 1992 and located in Napa, California. She also has been in private practice as a certified masseuse, certified hypnotherapist, and meditation teacher since 1982. She has extensive experience as public speaker, presenter, and community organizer in regional, statewide, national, and international forums. She has over thirty years in alternative healthcare fields, as well as a background in consultation for problem solving and stress reduction for individuals, families, and organizations. She has been an organic gardener since 1978 and has a lifelong commitment to social justice and international work on human rights and social justice issues. For more information, see <http://www.suscolcouncil.org>. *Correspondence:* [suscol@suscol.net](mailto:suscol@suscol.net).

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#### ABSTRACT

Charlie Toledo and Patricia Damery discuss Charlie's involvement in the formation of the Watershed Development plan for Napa County in its seminal years, 1992–1995, and more recently, her work on a state advisory board that functions as a consumer oversight of the California Public Utilities Commission. Charlie brings the indigenous wisdom and knowledge of the Native Americans as she discusses current water legislation in California and what is needed to meet the water crisis in California and in the world, viewing water as alive and sacred.

#### KEY WORDS

California drought, indigenous wisdom, Native American, regional water systems, sacred water, water, watershed