

## **Water Portal of the Americas**

A component of the UNESCO/IHP-WWAP Global Water Portal and  
a Prototype for International Cooperation

Much water information is currently accessible through a large number of Internet sites. However, this information can be contradictory and incomplete. It may be dated, and it often showcases projects that reflect the specific interests of large stakeholders. The development of a trusted network of information providers; the interaction of a community of researchers, information providers, and information users; and training to build information gathering and utilization capacity, will produce a valuable organization and resource for use by concerned citizens, political leaders, resource managers, researchers, and students.

In many developing countries where the Internet is beginning to make inroads, organizations that have data about local conditions are unaware of how to begin using the Internet to acquire and disseminate information within their own countries. Education and training is needed of both managers and technicians to enable them to make effective and efficient use of the Internet and to develop a sense of belonging to a community which can provide technical assistance and advice when needed.

National and international documents point to the need for the development of high quality information and better access to it. The UN World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP) points out the following needs:

- To identify and assess country information from different national and international sources and at different scales.
- To develop widely accepted indicators for the sustainable use and management of water resources.
- To pay more attention to issues of water quality, ecosystem dynamics and socio-economic influences.

The International Hydrological Programme (IHP) of UNESCO and WWAP in partnership with the WaterWeb Consortium are developing a prototype water portal for the Americas. This prototype will be a model of sharing and cooperation for the world to follow. The approach is to build a regional network of information that is seamlessly integrated with the UNESCO/IHP-WWAP global water portal. This model will allow individual international regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, etc) to develop the contacts, relationships, information, and issues that are most important to their regions while providing access to worldwide information and contributing to the world's body of knowledge.

Priorities for the first year of the Portal of the Americas prototype development include:

- Development of an organizational structure that will provide information, insure quality through a peer review process, and promote the adherence to sound information management standards.
- Capacity building in the area of information management and web site development for partners and contributing organizations.
- Identification of the public and private organizations that are active in water management in each country.
- Identification of the regional, national, and international water agreements, legislation, laws, and regulations effective in the Americas.
- Identification and promotion of integrated water resource management education opportunities.
- Identification and adoption of standardized reference materials for information management, such as thesauri, glossaries, and geographic identifiers.
- A comprehensive study of one significant water issue, including; a description of relevant issues, resources useful for further study, funding sources relevant to the topic, case studies, and related topical information.

Other types of information that will comprise the portal's content include, water news, events, academic and professional journals, water projects, networks, and models, funding sources, and communication tools. All of the resources referenced in the portal will be peer reviewed to assure a level of trustworthiness, and will be described and annotated using standardized methods and terminology. A cross platform search mechanism will be implemented which will allow a user entering from either the Portal of the Americas or the UNESCO/IHP-WWAP Global Portal to access the same information. Future portals in other regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, etc.) will be able to use the same design and thus be able to reference this global body of high quality information.

To develop and maintain the Portal of the Americas a relatively small and responsive organizational structure must be employed. A core management board (steering committee) consisting of five members representing UNESCO, the WWAP and the WaterWeb Consortium will oversee the project. Joint project managers, one each from UNESCO and the WaterWeb Consortium will manage the project. A technical advisory panel consisting of three to five information services and water information professionals will insure that sound technical decisions are made. Assuring information quality will be the responsibility of a scientific/peer review group which will include academics, water managers, and knowledgeable stakeholders. All of these groups will be diversified to insure representation of all of the Americas.

A critical component of the success of this project is effectively cooperating with information partners. Both providers and users of information must recognize the benefit of sharing information for the common good. Emphasis will be placed on recruiting partners and providing them with the tools and knowledge necessary for the development of a comprehensive and integrated water information network. A significant body of partners, the International Hydrological Programme (IHP) and the Inter-American Water Resources Network (IWRN) focal points, already know of the WWAP and the WaterWeb Consortium's work and will provide the foundation for this effort. This physical and virtual network will facilitate working partnerships, the use of reliable information, and the improvement of integrated water resource management decisions.

The World Water Development Report and the prototype Portal of the Americas will be presented at the Third World Water Forum, March 2003, in Kyoto, Japan. The goal at that time will be to display this model of cooperation, describe the steps that are necessary for the continuing development and maintenance of the portal, and to provide assistance for the development of other portals.

The purpose of this proposal is to describe a plan of action to strengthen and broaden UNESCO/IHP-WWAP and the WaterWeb Consortium's activities and to elicit support for the development of products necessary for successful integrated water resource management. The Third World Water Forum offers an excellent opportunity to raise awareness about the importance and necessity of having access to reliable water and water-related information upon which to base water management decisions. Through discussions on the Virtual Water Forum, the Water Information Summits, a special session on water information at the Third World Water Forum, and the development of a water information portal, UNESCO/IHP-WWAP and the WaterWeb Consortium can lead an international effort promoting access to and use of quality water information.