

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON ADDRESS BY ALEXANDRA COUSTEAU,
GRANDDAUGHTER OF
JACQUES-YVES COUSTEAU AND CO-FOUNDER OF EARTHECHO INTERNATIONAL

SUBJECT: THE IMPORTANCE OF WATER CONSERVATION

MODERATOR: SYLVIA SMITH, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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MS. SMITH: Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press
Club. I'm Sylvia Smith. I'm the Washington editor of the Fort Wayne
Journal Gazette, and president of the National Press Club. I'd like
to welcome club members and their guests, as well as those of you who
are watching on

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterward I'll ask
many questions as time permits. Please hold your applause during the
speech so that we have as time -- as much time as possible for
questions. And for our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that
if you do hear applause, it may be come from -- may be coming from our
guests and members of the general public who attend our events, not
necessarily the working crowd.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests, and ask them to
stand briefly as their names are called. From your right, John Sauer,
Communications director of Water Advocates; Esther Wielden (sp), an
energy reporter of Platts; Keith Hill, of BNA, Inc., and chairman of
the NPC board of governors; Cara Santos Pianesi -- I'm sorry,
communications officer of the United Nations Development Program;
Betsy Skalnek (sp), of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; Jan

Cousteau, mother and guest of our speaker.

Skipping over the podium, Melissa Charbonneau, of CBN News, and vice chairwoman of the NPC Speakers Committee; and speaking over our -- skipping over our speaker, Lori Russo, vice president of Stanton Communications, and a member of the Speakers Committee who organized today's event; Phillip Gibbs, guest of the speaker and program consultant for National Geographic; Linda Kramer, Washington editor of Glamour Magazine; JoAnne Norton, team leader at Bloomberg News; Eric Bontrager, environmental reporter of Greenwire; and Mia DeMezza, COO of EarthEcho and guest of the speaker. (Applause.)

Alexandra Cousteau made her first ocean expedition when she was four months old, and grew up in the world of water. So, it would have been understandable if, as an adult, she sought the driest place she could find to live and work. Instead, she chose to continue the family legacy created by her grandfather, Jacques Cousteau, and his son, Philippe.

For kids growing up in the 1950s, the TV movies of Jacques Cousteau's underwater exploration was a comprehensible adventure. America's West was well explored and space was a bit abstract. But the world beneath the sea was made both real and magical by Commander Cousteau. Jacques Cousteau embraced the showman part of his life's work because, as he said, "People protect and respect what they like."

Alexandra Cousteau is both carrying on her grandfather's legacy and expanding it. Her work embraces not only salt water, but fresh water as well. Her mission is to remind us how the world's oceans and fresh water supplies affect geography, humanity, cultures and economies. In February, she was honored by National Geographic as one of the world's most important emerging explorers, a group of young adventurers, scientists, photographers and storytellers who are making a difference in the world.

She and her brother founded EarthEcho International, a non-profit organization devoted to inspiring young people to live more environmentally sustainable lifestyles. Earlier this year, Cousteau expanded her philanthropic portfolio with an organization of her own called "Blue Legacy." Its mission is to help shape society's dialogue to include water as one of the defining issues of our century and the primary vehicle through which climate change will be felt.

Her next big project is the Blue Campaign, an effort to promote broad understanding of the importance of water conservation. Cousteau

is an Earth trustee for the U.N., a member of Dell's ReGeneration Advisory Council, and part of the Shark Alliance's steering committee. She is a woman who grew up exploring the world but she has Washington ties as well, as a graduate of our own Georgetown University.

Ladies and gentlemen, please help me in welcoming to the podium Alexandra Cousteau. (Applause.)

MS. COUSTEAU: Oh, my goodness, what a lovely and gracious and wonderful introduction, Sylvia. Thank you so much. And thank you all for coming here today. It is an extraordinary honor and a pleasure to

be here.

And thank you also for braving the rain. I understand that it must not have been easy. But, it is a blessing to have it, especially in light of the droughts that we've been plagued with over the past few months.

Given my family background, one might expect my focus today to be more centered on oceans and bringing conservation. And a year ago, it certainly would have been. It is only recently that I have expanded my focus to include both marine conservation and fresh water issues.

Some might say that my passion for the conservation of our "water planet" is a family tradition. Others joke that I have been brainwashed from birth. Still others speculate that I was bitten by the environmental bug. Whatever the case may be, I first went on expedition with my father, Philippe when I was four months old, as Sylvia mentioned, and in the years that followed I traveled with my parents on their adventures all over the world.

Those early experiences instilled in me my love of travel, discovery and exploration. It was a beautiful legacy to have been born into, one that is rich in meaning for so many generations of people who were inspired by a passion for the oceans and for protecting life on our planet.

I too felt inspired by my family -- by my father, Philippe, and my grandfather to participate in finding new ways to address the great challenges before us, to have a better understanding of what it means to live on this "water planet," and to engage fully in the dialogue about how we will shape the future that our children will inhabit.

During my studies at Georgetown University, I had the great fortune of meeting Mohammed Unes (sp) who, in so many ways, became a hero and a mentor for me. He taught me always to lead from the heart when looking for solutions to environmental and humanitarian issues.

And so while Unes (sp) is a brilliant economist and banker to the poor, and humanitarian, my grandfather was an extraordinary cinematographer, inventor and pioneering ocean explorer. Both were great men and contemporaries, each with vastly different areas of action and focus, but who shared a vision of the world that is uncompromisingly hopeful. And that is, perhaps, my greatest lesson.

But that lesson of hope has been hard to keep sight of at times. We live in a rapidly changing world where icebergs, glaciers, lakes, rivers, streams, reservoirs and aquifers have all joined the Siberian tiger, the polar bear and the mountain gorilla on the world's most endangered species list. Yet the incessant demand of a growing and thirsty population is threatening to make our diminishing water supply even scarcer for future generations.

This may come as a surprise to some. Water seems to be an endless resource. Fully 70 percent of earth's surface is covered with it. It flows in rivers and fills lakes, and it literally falls from the sky. How could it not be limitless?

So, when you consider that fresh water constitutes only 2.5 percent of the total water on the planet, it no longer seems loss limitless, especially when, of that small fraction, only 1 percent is accessible for human consumption, with the rest locked up in ice caps and glaciers.

Put another way, if all the world's water were in a one-gallon jug, accessible fresh water wouldn't even account for one teaspoon of it. So, if we're not careful with this precious resource, our taps will soon run dry.

When my grandfather premiered his Oscar-winning film "The Silent World" in 1956, it was the first time that people had ever seen what lay under the ocean waves. Just 52 years ago, only a handful of people had ever seen the wonders our oceans held. Most believed the ocean floor was flat and that it was populated by terrifying sea monsters.

Today we have a much better idea of marine ecosystems and the creatures that inhabit them. But while the past 50 years have allowed us to learn more about the oceans than ever before, we have also witnessed its most precipitous decline.

So while we once thought the oceans were just a surface because of our ignorance of what lay within them, my fear is that they will become just a surface again as we extinguish the biodiversity that lives there. And the same holds true for our glaciers, our lakes, our rivers, our aquifers, our streams -- these places that hold so much of the water we need to maintain our societies as well as to nourish our forests, our lands and our wildlife.

It seems that since the dawn of time, we have been trying to understand the relationship between human communities and the larger natural systems with which -- within which our societies exist. And this is a relationship that we are still struggling with today. Water is perhaps the most critical element of those systems.

In 2005, I was offered an opportunity to work on marine conservation in the Jewel of the Pacific. It's such a beautiful place. It's home to four marine World Heritage sites -- the Galapagos, Cocos Island, Caribe. It exists right between Costa Rica and Ecuador, and it's extraordinary -- important for the entire world to protect. I jumped at the chance to go back into the field and experience not only the realities of conservation in the developing world, but also the realities of life in coastal communities that were bearing the brunt of extreme degradation of their marine environments. Little did I know that the experiences I would have in the two years that I spent in Central America would not only influence my way of seeing these issues, but it would also generate a mind shift in the way I approached the problems facing our water planet.

Much of my time in Central America was spent in extremely poor coastal communities -- communities that had seen the almost-total devastation of their marine environments within a matter of decades. I worked with these communities to educate artisanal fishermen about sustainable fishing practices and also to explore alternative livelihoods with them. Living in villages that have no running water,

no electricity, no medical clinics and oftentimes no church -- the loss of their ability to sustain themselves with the bounty of the sea is an incalculable tragedy. They have lost not only their source of sustenance and income, but also a trade and an understanding of the ocean that has passed from father to son for generations. They have lost a way of life and their roles as leaders of their communities and providers for their families.

Just a couple of months ago, I was in Guatemala to document the freshwater crisis there and the efforts to provide water and

sanitation for children and schools. During my visit, I met a young woman named Amelia, who is just 24 years old. The first thing she thinks about when she wakes up in the morning is water. And she thinks about it throughout the day until she goes to sleep at night. In order to get water, she has to walk up and down a steep hill 30 minutes each way in spite of the fact that she is pregnant with her fifth child. She fetches water to drink, to cook with, to bathe her children with, to give to her chickens and her pigs, and to water her small garden with, all from the same river. The river is not very clean. There are days she goes there and finds dead dogs or people doing their laundry, or people taking a bath. But still, it is better than the alternative, which is no water at all.

The men of the village have mostly gone to the sugar canes to work or to build highways because there's no more water for them to practice agriculture at home. In schools, children spend recess waiting in line for cups of watery gruel when water is available and not too contaminated. In both the coastal fishing communities and the inland highland communities that I spent time with in Central America, water is a source of sustenance. But without it, the very fabric of these local societies begins to fray. Health declines and poverty worsens.

So these experiences showed me how all the water issues facing us are connected through the water cycle, both at the individual and the community level. And I realize that this nexus of issues is where I want to focus my efforts. We live on a water planet. This transparent liquid is the foundation of all life on Earth. It ensures our survival and enriches the cultures of our civilization. Yet despite the best efforts of scientists and filmmakers like my grandfather, our generation knows little more than his did about the ocean depths or the fragile scarcity of our freshwater resources. And while we debate the challenges climate change will bring to our lives, we have scarcely begun to realize that water is the vehicle through which climate change will be felt.

I believe that water will be the defining issue of the next century. And I also believe that history will be shaped by how we succeed or fail to manage our water resources both in the oceans and on land. Water is the most important life support system on the planet, vital to the existence of all life. It is the one thing on the planet that binds all of humanity as the source for survival and evolution. Without water, life on earth could not exist. It has been said that we will not achieve a sustainable planet until we recruit billions of eager participants. And while we have a long way to go to reach that goal, when it comes to water, we are rapidly getting the

numbers. Already over 1 billion people don't have access to fresh water, and that number is likely to grow substantially as desertification spreads and climates shift. In fact, lack of water may affect as many as 3.2 billion people by 2100.

Sea levels are rising and threatening to displace millions of people living in low-lying coastal communities globally. Reservoirs

all over the world are at a fraction of their capacity. China is planning to divert entire rivers to satisfy the needs of areas to the north that are succumbing to the growing desert. Fully a third of Greece burned last summer during the hottest drought in history. Moreover, many experts agree that in a decade -- in the next decade, there may be more water refugees than conflict refugees. And here at home, we are all familiar with the prolonged drought that has ravaged the country, causing not only individual hardship but also hurting local economies and businesses as well as ecosystems and wildlife. And it is predicted that the Midwestern and Southwestern states are entering a 90-year megadrought, threatening to take us back to the days of the Dust Bowl.

To make matters worse, the farm states rely heavily on water that is pumped from a huge underground reservoir underlying eight states, and it is rapidly being depleted by overuse.

These heatwaves, droughts and other climate stresses, both here and abroad, have contributed to the increase in food and water prices which has, in turn, caused the cost of wheat to skyrocket higher than it has in decades. These environmental pressures are now hitting our bottom line and affecting incomes and livelihoods all over the world.

Just the other day, however, I read some good news about efforts involving water conservation. It was an article in Discover Magazine that talked about the \$487 million groundwater replenishment system that has begun recycling sewage into drinking water at the largest facility of its kind at the Orange County, California. The treated water, which exceeds federal and state health standards, and is probably cleaner than the water we get in a lot of other places, is being used to recharge the aquifers that provide water for more than 2.3 million residents in the region.

If you think about it, each year, 2.1 trillion gallons of fresh, clean water are flushed down the toilet as sewage. With a few steps of treatment, this water could provide the purest possible drinking water for millions of people. Generally, this water is discarded into the ocean where it is no longer available as a source of fresh water and can even contribute to the degradation of marine ecosystems there. So projects like this, which are now being considered by municipalities in California, Texas, Florida, Singapore and Australia, are an important solution to one aspect of our water crisis. But, many more are needed at every level, and with the same ingenuity, commitment and investment.

Today we must shift our current general perception that water exists in fragmented states, to a more accurate understand of water as a system in which we are all downstream from one another. And as the old cowboy saying goes, "You don't want to drink downstream from the

herd" -- (scattered laughter) -- at least, not unless you have a water recycling plant nearby. I've met a lot of people that distance themselves from the term, "environmentalist," probably because they don't want to be perceived as a granola-munching, tree-hugging hippie. And as much as I love granola and trees, I probably don't qualify as a hippie but I'm definitely an environmentalist.

If you look environmentalist up in the dictionary, it is defined as one who is concerned with environmental quality, especially of the human environment with respect to the control of pollution. What part of that could anyone claim is unreasonable? What part of that would anyone not want to subscribe to? Who can claim to have no concern for

the environment today? Who doesn't care about clean water or clean air that is free from pollution or foods we eat that is free of contaminants and pesticides and heavy metals? We all want these things because we couldn't survive without them. Yet, so many of us are unable to make the connection between our survival and what it means today to be an environmentalist. We are all environmentalists, and especially when it comes to water.

The preservationist John Muir said it best, I believe, when he said, "When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world." The old adage used to be that to make a difference you had to do something, but my message today is that everything you do is making a difference. The challenge we all have to confront is this, "Is that difference helping or hurting?"

Just a few blocks from Capitol Hill lies one of most violent and dangerous neighborhoods in the city, the part of Southeast D.C. that is known as Anacostia. It is one of those places that gives Washington the distinction of being one of the most dangerous cities in the United States. But crime and poverty are not the only thing that distinguishes this neighborhood. Its namesake, the Anacostia River, is one of the most polluted in America. More than 1 billion gallons of raw sewage end up in it every year. And yet, here, in perhaps one of the most unlikely and challenging places, a group has formed called the Earth Conservation Corps, a project started to recruit local neighborhood youth to help clean up the river and the community. With the understanding that the quality of their environment directly impacts the health, safety and spirit of their communities, the Earth Conservation Corps has an 85 percent success rate of corps members who go on to higher education, are gainfully employed or remain involved in their community making it a better place; an astounding success that also sees real improvements to the Anacostia River.

They accepted the call to challenge the status quo and be empowered to make a positive difference, not only of the environment, but for themselves and their community. I know that my grandfather grew tired of answering questions about the environment in his later days. He said that he was weary of people ignoring the extraordinary miracles that exist in this world only to ask why who should protect it. He always wanted to know how we, as a society, got to the point where we could even ask that question. These young men and women of the Earth Conservation Corps understand the point that my grandfather was making. They have learned that to touch life is to know it, and

to know of life is to love it.

Just as I said earlier, that the last 50 years has seen the greatest amount of damage to our environment. It is the next 50 that will be the most critical. The next 50 years, those are our years, our years when we can change our heading and move in a new direction. So my focus today is to create communities of action around water issues at the local, regional and international level. Borrowing a phrase from my grandfather, "Our water planet returns to us what we

give it. If we protect it, it protects us, and if we abuse it, it returns the abuse." There are infinite ways that water supports life on this planet. Unfortunately, we have found just as many ways to degrade this precious resource. But, in spite of this, I believe that there are problems to all of these issues. And, I believe that we will work together to find the solutions. Because what does it really mean to be hopeful? I heard this once, and it stuck with me, "It is to cherish a desire with anticipation."

If we are uncompromising in our desire for a world where everyone has access to clean air and clean water, if cherish that desire and anticipate it fully, if we all work towards that goal, then perhaps, one day, it will become a reality. There is a letter that my grandfather wrote to my father, in eulogy, just a few months after his death. It is titled, "Pursuing Rainbows." And he wrote of the first time he had taken my father's hand in his to explore the emerald waters of the Shiburmi (sp) Reef in the Red Sea. He wrote of the excitement he felt in exploring the beauty of this new world with his young son, and sharing his desire to protect it.

Then he wrote of a flight they took together and what it meant to him. So I would like to read the last paragraph of that letter to you all here before I close my remarks.

"Three years ago I found myself sitting near you in the cockpit of our Catalina, the seaplane you had equipped especially for oceanography and for diving. From years of hang-gliding, piloting planes and helicopters and ballooning, you had acquired an unusual expertise. Now you were giving me a ride to the Mexican island of Isabela in the Pacific.

"Taking off in sheaves of water, the whole plane was an extension of your body. The roar of the motors was the expression of your joy. The clouds that dotted your sky were just other forms of water, like our own flesh. I looked at you -- my guide in the sky, as I have been your guide in the sea, and I saw your shining face, proud to have something to give back to me, and I smiled. Because I knew that pursuing rainbows in your plane you would always seek after the vanishing shapes of a better world."

We are all connected by the common hope and the common dream of a better world. So let us embrace the challenge of building it together.

Thank you. (Applause.)

MS. SMITH: Thank you very much. We have a whole pack of

questions from the audience.

Other than water recycling, like using the water that you wash your vegetable with to water your plants, what specific actions can the average citizen do to live blue? How about businesses?

MS. COUSTEAU: That's a wonderful question. The most important thing that we can do at any level of our life is to start with ourselves. And there are so many easy ways to conserve water. Turning off the faucet when you're brushing your teeth. Taking your car to a car wash. Not watering your lawn in the middle of the day, when most of it evaporates.

There's countless ways to do it, and for every person it's different. But what is the same is that it has to start with each one of us. And that we need to become role models for our communities in how to lead a more sustainable life, both green and blue.

MS. SMITH: What do you think about desalination as a solution to world water problems? And who is developing the leading desalination technologies?

MS. COUSTEAU: I knew someone was going to ask that question. (Laughter.)

I think the number one solution is to protect what we have. There are a lot of technologies out there that deal with different aspects of the water crisis. I'm not an expert on all of them. They are -- there's new ones being developed every day.

Desalinization does pose some important challenges and questions. The process of desalinization creates a lot of brine, a lot of byproduct that isn't necessarily good for the environment. There are probably, in some places, alternatives to desalinization. Maybe in others there aren't, and that's our only alternative, so we have to do it the best way we possibly can -- the most responsible and stable way we can.

But again, our most critical challenge ahead is to think about how we're going to protect what we have.

MS. SMITH: What is the biggest government obstacle to creating a sustainable vision for the U.S. in the next 10 years?

MS. COUSTEAU: The government has a very important role to play in that, and I think we're seeing increasingly that water issues are ending up in the Supreme Court. They're becoming topics of discussion as states for the first time in decades or even centuries are thinking about renegotiating water treaties between each other.

But if we are the people, then ultimately it is our responsibility to stand up and make this a priority and make sure that our government responds to that. That is ultimately the most important thing we can do.

If water is our life support system -- I mean, I don't know about you, but I want to make sure that my voice is heard in how that

resource is managed, if my life depends on having access to it. And I'm sure that all of you feel the same way.

Corporations, governments, in this country we have a voice. So it's time we used it.

MS. SMITH: And what do you want us to say? In other words, what would you want everybody in this room to contact their members of Congress and ask them to do or not do?

MS. COUSTEAU: There is legislation that needs to be passed, but not just at the federal level. It needs to become a priority even at the local levels of government. There are places, little towns in the United States that don't let you water your lawn if there's a water crisis. And it's legislated so that that resource is protected for everyone in the community.

It's not perfect. It may not be how we're used to living or how we want to live, but it is indicative of the new reality that we will live in if we don't start managing our resources more effectively.

And at the federal level, as well, we need to protect water resources, not only here, but abroad. There are communities all over the world that don't even have access to it. If we can allocate funding to help those people, we will ultimately be helping ourselves.

Because the thing about water is that it doesn't respect borders. It doesn't have citizenship. It doesn't have religious or political views. It cycles endlessly through our world. And what we do here impacts people on the other side of the planet, and that's something that is incredibly important to realize, when you live in a country like the United States that has the potential for doing so much good at an environmental level all over the world.

MS. SMITH: You've mentioned conservation and individuals simply not using as much water mindlessly. What about pollution efforts? What actions -- and this is something less easy for an individual, I think, probably to address. But what actions would you like to see this government do with respect to water pollution?

MS. COUSTEAU: I would like to see us take a precautionary approach. I was flying to Europe a couple of months ago and I was sitting next to a man on the plane. And he started talking about what he did for a living, and he worked in the metal industry.

I don't know very much about what is involved in the metal industry, but he actually -- before he knew what I do, talked very freely about the pollution of water -- (laughs) -- in the metal industry, because apparently it uses a lot of water. And every time it's -- when they coat something with chrome they have to dip it and let it dry and dip it and let it dry, and then all of that water is released into the environment, complete with heavy metals and chemicals and all these other things. (Chuckles.)

I said, really? That's very interesting. And he said, what do you do? And I said -- (laughter) -- I work on water issues. Oh,

really? Are you a lobbyist? Well, of sorts, I guess.

I advocate for the protection of our water resources. And he said, oh, well, we have a lot of really great initiatives for that. (Chuckles.) That's great.

But I think that, again, everybody has an incredibly important role to play in the management of our water resources. Industry, it's so important that they take a precautionary approach, that they don't dump these toxic chemicals into our waterways before they even know the impact of it.

The interesting thing that he said, and the reason I told that story, was he said that they were spending a lot of money on government lobbyists to try to protect the interests of the metal industry, so that they wouldn't be unfairly prohibited from doing business as usual. And I said, well, what does that mean? And he said, well, we don't want them to take the precautionary approach, but that would just cost us a lot of money.

And I said, well, what is the cost of not taking the precautionary approach in terms of health of children? And lives of communities? In terms of the food we eat. Again, these natural resources that we depend on, what is the cost of not taking the precautionary approach? I appreciate the importance of your stockholders, but I'm not one of them. And so I would advocate that government and industry adopt a precautionary approach. I think that's the most important thing we can do.

MS. SMITH: Since we're in D.C. and in the midst of a presidential race, what are your thoughts on the environmental positions of the candidates?

MS. COUSTEAU: Is there anyone here from the League of Conservation Voters? (Laughs.) You? (Response off mike.) You're a member. Would you like to answer the question -- (inaudible)? (Laughs.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Off mike.)

MS. SMITH: No.

MS. COUSTEAU: No. (Laughter.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Off mike.)

MS. COUSTEAU: Yeah. I'm not accustomed to taking a side publicly in politics, because it's not my role. My role is to advocate the importance of these issues for people and let them make up their own minds about how to implement those beliefs, and hope that if we believe in what we believe, really, then we will take action based on those beliefs.

And I think people are savvy enough and have had enough interaction with the candidates to make up their own minds about who they feel would be most responsible for taking the precautionary approach.

MS. SMITH: I had asked you about the biggest obstacle in this country, but this questioner wants to know what do you think is the biggest obstacle to effective water management worldwide? Are they different issues than there are in the U.S.?

MS. COUSTEAU: Yes, there are. There are different obstacles to water management in different places around the world. It varies country by country. But I would say that perhaps what all the countries that I have interacted with on this issue have in common is lack of political will and lack of public will.

People feel so disconnected from the environment in ways that I don't always understand. There's this idea, this unconscious thought that if I do what everybody else does, if I just kind of live the status quo, then I won't really have an impact on the environment because everybody else is doing the same thing.

And it goes back to what I said before that everything we do makes a difference, and to effectively manage water, no matter where we are or what country we're talking about, that will needs to exist. And I think that's the first step.

MS. SMITH: Are there any countries doing a commendable job of conserving water and, if so, what can we learn from them?

MS. COUSTEAU: There are countries doing a commendable job of conserving water. It's funny, having spent two years living in Central America, people say, well, wow -- Costa Rica, that's amazing. They do everything right. (Laughs.) And my answer is that a lot of people do a lot of things right, and a lot of people do a lot of things wrong. No one country has all the answers.

But I think that we can learn from each other. Costa Rica is doing interesting things with recycling water through the environment. And if we can have a global dialogue where we share success stories and challenges, then I think that we will go a lot farther a lot faster in finding the solutions that we need in our own countries.

MS. SMITH: Are there some specifics you can tell us about Costa Rica? Not the negatives, but the positives?

MS. COUSTEAU: (Chuckles.) There's a lot of positive things that Costa Rica is doing. They were really leading the charge on climate credits a long time ago. They have abolished their army. They are -- their president won the Nobel Peace Prize. That's nice.

And in a certain part of the country, I have a friend who raises tilapia and a lot of the tilapia, actually, you find in whole foods comes from his production. And it's all organic, it's all sustainable, it's all incredibly well done. And all of the water that they use for their tilapia production flows into the rice fields and gets filtered through the rice fields. So all of the waste from the fish gets used as fertilizer for the rice fields, and then that water gets pumped back into the environment.

So they've found really interesting and innovative ways to

recycle water naturally, rather than having it flow into rivers and back into the environment with all of the waste in it.

MS. SMITH: You mentioned aquaculture, and we got a couple questions on that topic. Could you please address what you and your organization are doing to try to stop the ultimate depletion of the world's fish and seafood resources, is one of the questions. And another one is will aquaculture replace the world's wild fish? Is that safe?

MS. COUSTEAU: Fisheries -- I could talk for a long time about this issue. (Chuckles.) And I'll try to keep it brief, but it's an issue I feel so much passion about, is fisheries management. And honestly, when I first started learning about fisheries management, I did not think it would be as interesting as it is. The name is kind of off-putting, I think, fisheries management, but it's an extraordinary issue, and it goes to the heart of what it means to have a sustainable ocean.

Living in Central America, I was with the people that no longer had a life because fisheries had been managed unsustainably. And there are so many things that are wrong with the way we fish in the oceans.

And fisheries are collapsing left, right, and center. Species that you commonly find on your menus are going extinct, and we don't even know about it. So fisheries is something that we need to find solutions to, and we need to find solutions to it soon.

Aquaculture is part of the solution, but it is not 100 percent, every time, the solution. And I would use the same example with shrimp.

Shrimp fisheries are a very destructive fishery. It's bottom trawling. They go and they scrape everything off the bottom of the ocean and then bring it on board.

And everything -- all those species die; all of that biomass dies and then they pick out the few shrimp that they want and then shovel it back into the ocean dead. The bycatch is unbelievable. For every pound of shrimp, there's 10 or more pounds of other creatures that were caught, killed and thrown back into the ocean, including sea turtles.

So shrimp is not a sustainable fishery. And with few exceptions, the aquaculture of shrimp is not sustainable either. Here in the United States, we have very high-tech, sustainable, wonderful aquaculture facilities for shrimp, but in many parts of the developing world, they dig out critical and coastal environments like mangroves -- dig them out, put in shrimp ponds, put the shrimp in there, let them live for a few years until it's so putrid that the shrimp can't even live in there anymore. And then they go and rip out some more mangroves and put in some more shrimp and it actually -- it's not only bad for the environment but it's also really harmful for the communities and for the women and the children that work in these industry.

So aquaculture is not always the right answer, but for some species it is. And catfish have been aquacultured very well. As I said, shrimp here in the United States, in these facilities, have been aquacultured beautifully.

Swordfish -- not good; tuna, not so good; Chilean sea bass -- it's going extinct. Let's stop eating it; let's find alternatives.

So there's no cut-and-dry answer for any of these issues. It's really a case-by-case thing, but we need to care enough to know what's going on and to implement the solutions that we do have.

MS. SMITH: What role do U.S. tourists play in the degradation of water and water resources and how do we become good tourists?

MS. COUSTEAU: Tourism is a form of consumption, right? You go to a place and you consume what it has to offer. Entertainment, or culture, wildlife -- and as we know, there are responsible, sustainable forms of consumption and there's irresponsible forms of consumption. I really believe that ecotourism should be the only tourism. (Laughs.) I know that's not very realistic. But I've seen U.S. tourists play a role in the degradation in a lot of environments. And I've also seen them play a part in the solution of supporting small hotels, supporting ecolodges, making sure that their enjoyment of a place doesn't diminish it for the local people who live there or the local wildlife that live there, or the environment that lives there.

So again, it comes down to consumption; it comes down to making choices that are environmentally sustainable.

MS. SMITH: Somebody wants to know, which is better for the environment, tap water or bottled?

MS. COUSTEAU: I knew that one was coming, too. (Laughs.)

Tap water is perfectly good water to drink. I think that there's a misperception that tap water is not safe to drink, but here in the United States it is very safe to drink. And, in fact, a lot of the bottled water you buy is actually bottled tap water. So you're just spending a lot of money for nothing.

MS. SMITH: (Laughs.)

MS. COUSTEAU: (Laughs.) And other waters are flown in from halfway across the world.

What does that do for climate change or emissions or all sorts of different issues that we're dealing with? I think the best thing we can do is drink tap water or buy a filter and filter tap water. But bottled water is overrated.

MS. SMITH: (Laughs.) Questioner wants to know, conflicts are growing among water users in the U.S., such as between irrigation farmers and mushrooming population centers in the Southwest U.S. and elsewhere. How do we balance conflicting needs?

MS. COUSTEAU: I don't have an answer for that. I don't think anyone has an answer for that. Those are the challenges that lie ahead. And that's what we're going to have to work out. We need to expect that these challenges will become more and more severe and more and more common in the years ahead. We have to expect that. We will be dealing with things that we are not accustomed to dealing with.

What are the solutions to that? That's a very good question; I wish I knew, but nobody does. I think that -- that there will be some tough decisions to be made and I think that not everybody is going to be happy with the solutions that are found. And I think that there will be conflicting needs. I don't know how we'll deal with it, though. I don't know what the solutions are.

MS. SMITH: Several people submitted various versions of this question, asking what your thoughts are on the world population as an environmental issue.

MS. COUSTEAU: World population is an environmental issue almost by definition. If people need natural resources to survive and there's more and more and more people and less and less and less natural resources, then it is an environmental issue. One of the most critical needs that conservation addresses is how to find equitable distribution of natural resources that our lives depend on.

My father said -- he said years ago in the '70s when he started looking at issues that nobody was looking at -- he said, what will it take for everyone in the world to have clean water, clean air, maybe a tree in their general area, some grass, some birds -- I mean, just the basics -- clean food -- what will it take for everybody to have access to that in whatever way that manifests -- through access to food and water and health and prosperity? There is going to be less and less of that to go around. But everybody fundamentally has a right to it. No matter who they are or where they live -- they all have a right to it.

How do we solve that? How do we portion it out? Can we even find a solution to it? Again, these are questions that we're all struggling with and no one has really found an answer to. And there are people who are hopeful and treated as fools and there are people who are not hopeful and treated as pessimists. And there's people who walk right down the middle of the road on these issues. Everybody has their own ideas about what the solutions are and how things will go. But I do know, again, that we all need to be part of that discussion.

MS. SMITH: We're almost out of time, but before asking the last question, we have a couple of important matters to take care of -- first, let me remind our members of future speakers: on May 16th, that's Friday, we have Robert Mueller who's the director of the FBI. On May 19th we have Douglas Feith, former undersecretary of Defense who will discuss war and decision. And on May 20th we have James Peake who's the secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Second, I'd like to present our guest with our centennial mug featuring Eric Sevareid who's on a new postage stamp.

MS. COUSTEAU: Thank you.

MS. SMITH: Thank you much. (Applause.)

And our last question. What is the scariest moment you've experienced underwater?

MS. COUSTEAU: The scariest moment -- I can't remember.

MS. SMITH: (Laughs.)

MS. COUSTEAU: (Laughs.) And I don't know if it's because I just can't remember or because it's been so long since I've been in the water -- unfortunately.

My mom and my father taught me to swim when I was three months old, so I've never been afraid of the water. And everything I've encountered underwater I've been so in love with and so fascinated by that I've never really had a scary moment. It's just a blessing every time I get to go -- and no, never scary. I think I've had some scarier moments walking down back allies --

MS. SMITH: (Laughs.) Well, you give hope to aquaphobes in the audience. Thank you so much. (Applause.)

Thank you so much to our speaker for coming today and thank you for coming as well. I'd also like that thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booz and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also thanks to the NPC Library for its research.

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Thank you very much, and we're adjourned. (Applause.)

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