

## **The Yamuna River Declaration**

**Resulting from the Workshop: “Yamuna River: A Confluence of Waters, A Crisis of Need”**

**Held at TERI University, Delhi, January 3-5, 2011**

**Sponsored by:**

**TERI University**

**Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies**

**Sri Radha Raman Temple, Vrindivan India**

Coming together as scientists, religious scholars, religious leaders, and concerned participants we acknowledge the current state of the Yamuna River as severely degraded and in need of attention through collaborative research, focused action, and shared compassion. Several calls for central planning and professional engineering have been articulated at various times and at diverse forums that have preceded this workshop. However, we have consciously opted to explore the utility of interdisciplinary knowledge as well as the sense of religiosity and moral responsibility in restoring and protecting the river. We acknowledge the long history of work on the river, especially as related to the Yamuna Action Plan. Nonetheless, we hope to make our own modest contribution beginning with our interdisciplinary workshop held at TERI University in Delhi.

By focusing on the Yamuna River we do not intend to turn away from the problems of other rivers in India or stress the spiritual and cultural significance of one river over others. Rather, we have gathered as an interdisciplinary group committed to conservation of the precious resource of water, especially in north India where some 60 million people live near and thus depend on the Yamuna. In this workshop we have explored current conditions of the

Yamuna River, the roles of interdisciplinary and values-based approaches in water management, conservation, and preservation, as well as what research projects and educational and conservation projects might be of assistance as we go forward. We have also reflected on the shared perspective of concern for the river that provides a common ground for dialogue among scientists, religious leaders, and humanists.

In our discussions we have come to realize that a segmented view of the Yamuna River, whether in analysis of the problems or in suggested solutions, may be insufficient inasmuch as it lacks a holistic and integrated framework that explicitly recognizes the intimate linkages between ecosystems and human communities.

A way toward more interdisciplinary, environmental action may be found in integrating cultural and religious perspectives with scientific analysis. Thus we can speak of different cultural communities along with distinct biotic communities along the river. At the same time we acknowledge the utilitarian agendas of damming and channeling the river for agriculture and waste management. Each of these differences has historical significance, but they all relate to one river whose life is now imperiled throughout.

Simultaneously, we especially ponder the paradoxical question of how a sacred river of love could become so defiled over several decades since the 1980s. No doubt the rapid industrialization and urbanization of north India has overwhelmed the ability of the river to purify itself, as its flow is diminished in so many sections. Concomitant with such analysis is an inquiry into the process that is commonly recognized as 'development' so as to understand the historical and political forces shaping the course of the river.

Unique among world rivers, the Yamuna and several other Indian rivers are revered as Goddesses in the living Hindu tradition. We wonder, therefore, if there might be a way for devotees of the river to integrate a deeper sense of environmental awareness and conservation into their religiosity. Thus, pollution could be mitigated through environmental engagement as a loving and respectful relationship with the river. Are there not new and creative ways to bring scientific research on the river together with the transformational power of religious devotion? The life of the river may depend on such a synergy of efforts.

Recognizing that water is essential for life, that agricultural production is crucial for India, and that Mother Yamuna is more than a resource to be misused, we have entered into this interdisciplinary dialogue with the hope that the Yamuna River can be restored and sustained.

With this in mind we are committed to:

- 1) **Fostering ongoing scientific research** at TERI and Yale Universities that increase our understanding of the hydrological, biological, and ecological dynamics of the Yamuna River. This information should be shared across interdisciplinary boundaries to promote an understanding of the inherent value of the river.

For example:

- How can scientific research assist agricultural water usage to increase the amount of flow in the Yamuna River, and decrease the pesticide, insecticide, and fertilizer load returned to the river?

- What are the implications of climate change on the Yamuna River for the human and non-human communities that depend on it in many ways?
- How can scientific information regarding water quality be made available in an intelligible form to a larger public?

2) **Promoting local educational and conservation projects** in religious settings that would deepen particular communities' understandings of the relationships between human waste, industrial pollution, and reduced river flow. What religious practices and concepts can educate practitioners to store rainwater, conserve water, and restore the river?

3) **Continuing this process of dialogue** that brings together diverse communities along the Yamuna River so that voices, projects, and aspirations might be articulated regarding scientific research and religious education concerning water usage and water ethics. We should consider how we might draw into future gatherings the regulatory and water law communities so that these interdisciplinary and values-based discussions might have policy implications. We hope to engage the business community and developers along the river, especially in the pilgrimage city of Vrindavan where apartment construction is occurring at a feverish pace.

We remain convinced that interdisciplinary discussions bringing together scientific, policy, religious, and economic perspectives may help to move discussions beyond stagnation and reach out toward creative possibilities of restoration.