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**Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay,
Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of World Water Day**

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The question of drinking water resources is one of the major issues of our century. Its implications are manifold: humanitarian, ecological and geopolitical. One of the possible answers can certainly be found in so-called “nature-based solutions”: solutions that are inspired by the natural water cycle and that encourage the protection and restoration of biospheres.

In order to highlight the very promising potential of this type of sustainable solution, this year on World Water Day, the United Nations will focus on the theme: “Nature for Water”.

The extent of the challenges that face us can be illustrated by a few figures.

According to the latest United Nations world water development report, 3.6 billion people around the world, which is about half of the world's population, live in potentially water-scarce areas during at least one month a year. This figure could rise to more than 5 billion in 2050.

Over the same period, the global demand for water, currently estimated at around 4,600 km³ per year could reach 5,500³ or 6,000 km³ per year. At 4,600 km³ per year, current global usage of freshwater is already close to the maximum threshold of sustainability and this fragile balance in fact masks the major local and regional disparities.

One alarming example is that of Cape Town, South Africa, which is poised to become the first major city in the world to run out of drinking water. “Day zero” is the name given to 12 April 2018, when Cape Town’s water reserves are expected to be at just 13% of their usual level.

The reasons for this global shortage are well known: freshwater resources are continuously under the combined pressures of global population growth, climate change, the exponential increase in consumption and the spread of lifestyles that squander resources. One figure illustrates this wastage: 80% of wastewater returns to the ecosystem without being treated. These developments are leading to a degradation of ecosystems that further accentuates ecological imbalances and water scarcity.

It is therefore urgent for solutions to be found to protect Earth’s natural capital. Solutions that protect, manage and restore natural and modified ecosystems, and that respond to human and ecological challenges in an effective and sustainable manner, improving the well-being of individuals and preserving biodiversity, must be promoted. Planting new forests, reconnecting rivers to flood plains and restoring wetlands are solutions that will, among other things, address contemporary water management challenges, particularly with a view to developing sustainable agriculture and building the cities of tomorrow.

As the United Nations launches the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, UNESCO reaffirms its commitment to support governments in their transition to green and circular economies and in their efforts to implement better-integrated water policies. All these efforts must contribute to the achievement of the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, where the crucial issue of water goes hand-in-hand with equally important issues: the eradication of poverty; healthcare; economic growth; constructing sustainable cities; developing responsible consumption and production patterns; and ultimately, peace.