



ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

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## **Welcoming Address on the Opening of the Conference**

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Ladies and Gentlemen

To talk about water in Engelberg during three days could give rise to uncomfortable feelings. Not enough time has gone by for the monastery village to forget the events of 2005 – when it was cut off from the outside world, numerous houses were damaged and basements were flooded; lots of people were suddenly faced with difficulties and misery. Television images of the disaster left an indelible impression in people's memories, in and outside of Switzerland and the images raised an overwhelming response of solidarity.

In our series "Science and Trust", we have chosen "Water" to complete the triad that started with Climate and Energy. The topic has reached an unexpected and newsworthy level that is totally different from the one related to the town of Engelberg, which I outlined just before.

Water, the blue gold.

Xenophon's *Anabasis* from the year 400 before Christ narrates the journey of the Ten Thousand, an army of Greek mercenaries, from Babylon to Byzantium. While severely affected by the dangers of the enemy countries and the inhospitable forces of nature, drought in the mountains, and famine as well as injuries, enormous distances, exhaustion and hopelessness, the troops reached a mountain. As soon as the frontlines of the forces got to the mountain, they began to shout. „But, as the shouts kept getting louder and nearer, as the successive ranks that came up all began to run at full speed towards the ranks ahead that were one after another joining in the shout, and as the shout kept growing far louder as the number of men grew steadily greater, it became quite clear to Xenophon that there was something of unusual importance; so he mounted a horse, and pushed ahead to lend aid; and in a moment he heard the soldiers shouting: "The sea! The sea!" (*Thalatta, thalatta*) and passing the word along. Then indeed they fell to embracing one another, and generals and captains, with tears in their eyes".

The UN estimates that if the current water consumption continues, two out of three people will suffer water shortage by the year 2025.



Water will become a rare commodity. Water is power. Water makes survival possible. Water does not only destroy, it also creates life and food.

Water gives power. Resources are unequally distributed. Those who own water are especially powerful and are at risk of abusing such power. But as I recently read: "It is a terrible irony that clean water is most expensive for those who can least afford it." (Cathy Flavi-ano)

The water cycle connects society and nature. The history of mankind is closely linked to the control of blue waterflows of rivers, lakes and wells. Many wars have been fought over water. Human settlements and cities were built next to water. Those who controlled water, controlled the country.

Blue gold is characterized by an outstanding socio-political dimension that gained increasing severity in the last years and will continue to do so. This year's conference will therefore focus on the infinite topic of water, namely whether or not water is a public or a private good and who has the power to control this important element.

The focus on this topic is charged with explosive force and discussion thereto quickly changes over from local to global politics.

This is our intention; and with the participation of young scientists and their contribution to the future of water supplies in their respective countries of origin, a global discussion during the conference is guaranteed.

Switzerland and especially the Alpine Cantons have their own water history. However, it is not only their past, but also their present; let me put water rates as an example. Our country is now and then referred to as the water castle of Europe. And a castle owner has an increased responsibility.



I am pleased that such a large number of participants accepted our invitation and I give you a warm welcome here in Engelberg. I am convinced that we are going to have three fascinating days that, for the participants and in the way of project proposals, it shall have a lasting impact and effects that transcend the conference. The conference of the Academia Engelberg also offers opportunity to make many new acquaintances and to relax body and soul. Contrary to some rumours, also this year we will not drink only water...

Already now, I wish to thank Bruno Porro, president of the programme committee, and his collaborators, and Dominik Galliker and his crew for the unflagging preparation work.

I now open the conference 2007, and it is my wish for everybody that next Friday we can shout in every direction: Thalatta, thalatta, we see the sea.