

Walk of water

Stories

ADB WATER PRESENTS

Walk of Water: Identities

From rituals to resistance, the 2025 Walk of Water contest explored how water shapes our existence. These stories trace water's fingerprint on culture, gender, and nature—reminding us that protecting water means protecting our identity.

The ADB-supported South East Asia Regional Awards, highlighted the power of community-led conservation, including Giacomo d'Orlando's Crocodile Guardians, which documents a "delicate truce" in the Philippines through his story, "Crocodile Guardians." His work captures the efforts to save the critically endangered Philippine crocodile, a species with fewer than 200 individuals remaining in the wild.

Young storytellers explored the intersection of water and dignity. Tianxiao Wang captured the shifting struggles of traditional whalers in Lamalera, Indonesia, where a 500-year-old subsistence tradition faces the dual pressures of ecological decline and a shifting economy. Abyan Madani spotlighted Jakarta's "Pasukan Biru" (Blue Troops) – the frontline workers of Jakarta's Water Resources Agency who maintain the city's infrastructure, wading into sewers and canals to clear debris and maintain drainage systems.

The contest also illuminated the visceral link between water and global food security. Stories from across the globe showed how water defines our plates—from salt extraction in India and fishing along the Mekong river, to the last horse shrimpers of Belgium, a tradition documented by Kristina Steiner's first-prize-winning documentation.

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Born in 2020 at the University of Oxford, Onewater is a creative think tank bridging the gaps between water science, policy, and society. We believe that while data informs, narrative drives action.

STORIES | We host the world's most significant archive of contemporary water photography (→30,000 images). We also provide a free, multilingual platform where everyone can learn from others and contribute their own stories to global conversations. We do so because at the root of systemic gaps in funding, regulation and service delivery lie two key issues: a lack of education and ineffective policy.

PROJECTS | We blend art, science and web wizardry to create content, host events and deliver expert advice to build bridges between the public, practitioners, artists, academia and policymakers. From developing hydrological models, communication services and nature-positive strategies to designing interactive WebGIS platforms, we provide the tools to make your work accessible and your goals actionable.

EVENTS | From conferences to art exhibitions and family festivals – Onewater events bring together experts, creatives, and curious minds of all ages, fostering exchange and inviting shared learning. Whether at UNESCO headquarters or local riverbanks, we transform passive data into immersive experiences where everyone can engage in a meaningful dialogue with water.

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INDIA

Salt of the Earth

Photos by Gavin Burnett

In the searing expanse of India’s Little Rann of Kutch, over 100,000 Agariya salt workers harvest more than 70% of the nation’s salt by hand. Brine is both lifeline and poison—fueling livelihoods while destroying health. Amid floods and drought, families endure heat, blindness, and scarcity, revealing a powerful story of resilience etched in salt and sun.



Portrait of the Agariya workers and their children that work the salt pans in the Rann.

The salt is "grown", harvested and thrown into small piles on the edge of the pans. The image shows An Agariya worker throwing salt into piles for collection.



Workers starting the process of removing the salt crystals from the water in the salt pans.



A worker feeding the salt hopper on the edge of the Rann for truck collection.



After the brine has been pumped from depth the water is raked and agitated over several days. Agariya workers use a wooden gantaras (rake) to allow evaporation and to encourage formation of the salt crystals.



Badagara salt is the product of this labor.



Agariya female workers moving the crystallised salt (Badagara) into bigger piles for trucks in the Little Rann.

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INDONESIA

Faith, blood, and the fading tides of Lamalera

Photos by Tianxiao Wang

Perched on the cliffs of Lamalera, one of the world’s last subsistence whaling communities balances faith, danger, and survival. For over 500 years, the Lamafa people have leapt from wooden boats to harpoon sperm whales, giant manta rays and other marine creatures, sustaining a barter economy now strained by schooling, cash needs, and vanishing marine life. As catches decline and modernity advances, Lamalera stands between preserving tradition and protecting the sea that defines it.

Around 7 a.m., the boats set out for the hunt and usually return to the village by 5 p.m. The hunting grounds are typically located several miles off the village's coastline, requiring a voyage of 2 to 3 hours to reach.

For generations, hunting has sustained 75 years old Ignasius Serang Blikolong's family – a tradition he naturally inherited when he first set sail at 20. But in 2018, tragedy struck: his youngest son, Benyamin, went to sea to support the family and never returned. This loss nearly drained his will to carry on. Yet his response was archetypal. He did not reject the sea; he returned to it through creation. He began building miniature whaling boats and eventually a new full-sized whaling boat (Peledang).

Every afternoon, Emen, 16 years old, practices traditional whaling techniques alone, leaping off the rocks into the sea again and again. "Becoming a whale hunter," he says, "is not about proving our skills to others. It is about carrying the weight of tradition—piercing through the modern world's misconceptions with a harpoon."



Faith and memory: The villagers place these whale bones on the shore not only to honor the glory and sacrifices of their ancestors but also as a symbol of God's blessing. The bones serve as a silent reminder to future generations—to cherish this legacy and the traditions passed down to them.

The trophy: Mimi, a local girl, proudly holds up the freshly cut dolphin fin, a prize from her father's hunt.

During the holidays, Diskotik's sister came to visit him in the village. When she saw what the villagers call a "large black dolphin" lying on the shore, she could hardly believe her eyes.



This is the living room of 19 year old Pito, where family portraits and religious symbols fill the walls. As the youngest son in his family, he is not old enough to join his brothers at sea. He stands beside the statue of Christ, eager to become a Lamafa, just like them.

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INDIA

Where Water Governs

Photos by Arpan Kalita

In the Ziro Valley of Arunachal Pradesh, the Apatani have engineered a living water system where rice and fish thrive in the same flooded fields. Guided by gravity-fed channels and generations of knowledge—largely held by women—water becomes movement, memory, and sustenance. Even as roads cut through the valley, this cyclical practice of flooding and fallow endures, revealing a resilient model of ecological balance.



Curved rice paddies in the Ziro Valley reveal an agricultural system designed around the careful movement and control of water.

A road crosses water-filled rice fields, showing how modern infrastructure intersects with centuries-old Apatani water systems.



Mud-covered hands lift a basket from the water, embodying daily labor guided by generations of knowledge in managing rice paddies, fish, and the valley's intricate water flows.



Women work together in flooded fields, coordinating planting, water flow, and fish care.



An Apatani woman stands in a paddy field holding fish, representing women's central role in sustaining agricultural practices.



An elder Apatani woman with traditional nose plugs and facial tattoos, carrying identity and agricultural knowledge shaped by time and water.



Dry paddies lie fallow after harvest, allowing the soil to rest and recover before the next agricultural cycle.

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PHILIPPINES

Crocodile guardians:
Redefining the Buwaya

Photos by Giacomo d’Orlando

In the northern Sierra Madre of Luzon, the critically endangered Philippine crocodile survives not in wilderness, but in pockets like sanctuaries and rivers where people have chosen, repeatedly and deliberately, to redefine their relationship with it. Once driven to the brink, its recovery now rests on community sanctuaries, head-start programs, and a powerful shift in perception—from feared “buwaya” to something to be proud of.

The Philippine crocodile is a freshwater crocodilian endemic to the Philippines. With fewer than 200 remaining, it is considered one of the rarest species on Earth and is classified as critically endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. For comparison, there are approximately 1,800 giant pandas and 5,000 tigers left in the wild - species emblematic of the global biodiversity crisis.

Communities depend on rivers for daily survival, necessitating a shared environment with the wildlife. To maintain this balance, a culture of mutual respect is instilled in children, who are taught that crocodiles remain passive unless disturbed or harmed.



From the Dunoy Lake observatory tower, wardens Victorino Montanes and Rogelio Etchore monitor crocodile behavior. Beyond observation, these law-trained community members are responsible for enforcement, public outreach, and conducting quarterly river surveys to update wild population data.

Dunoy residents release a head-started juvenile into the Disulap River, marking the culmination of months in monitored captivity – a community effort to strengthen survival in one of the world’s rarest crocodiles.



During the dry season (April–May), crocodiles construct mound nests for their eggs (70–100g) that incubate for 77–85 days. Often situated in cornfields and vulnerable to agricultural disturbance or predators, these nests are actively tracked by volunteers, who secure them with signage or fencing.



The average length of a baby crocodile is less than 20 cm To enhance the chances of survival, once the nest has been located and secured, the hatchlings are collected and transported to Conservation Centers, where they are bred in captivity until they reach juvenile age.



Field operators mark retrieved hatchlings by clipping tail scutes with a scalpel, assigning each a unique code for lifetime monitoring. To prevent competition, hatchlings are isolated for two months before being moved to communal ponds to develop swimming, hunting, and social skills.

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INDONESIA

Pasukan Biru: The blue heroes of Jakarta's rainbow troops

Photos by Abyan Madaxni

As Jakarta sinks and megaprojects promise salvation, this photo story turns attention to the city's unseen lifeline: the 4,000 Pasukan Biru (blue troops) of the Water Resources Agency. Wading through canals, clearing sludge, and responding to floods, they embody Jakarta's real climate adaptation. Beyond sea walls and pumps, it is their endurance, skill, and daily presence that keep the city afloat.

Blue Troops workers maintain one of Jakarta's industrial drainage canals.

Blue Troops stacking bags of dredged sludge after working from morning to midday heat.



Close-up of Blue Troops' boots beside foul-smelling sludge bags.



Amphibious excavators lined up along the coast for canal and river dredging.

"Take the photo – people only notice us when floods come," said a Blue Troops worker.



The Blue Troops' headquarters with blue buildings and vehicles.

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MYANMAR

Born from the Water

Photos by Phyo Kyaw

"Born From the Water" invites you into the heart of a lakeside community where water is life, heritage, and guide. This evocative photo series beautifully captures the timeless rhythm of fishing and sun-drying the daily catch on traditional bamboo racks. Many of the techniques—how to slice the fish, how to check the color, how to spread each piece—are learned from parents and grandparents. These skills are part of the community's identity. They are passed down not through books, but through shared work, patient teaching, and observation.

The fish glisten under sunlight, a vital step in the drying process.

Two workers lift a rack of sliced fish toward the sky.

Fish are inspected, arranged, and turned under the sun.



Placing the final pieces under the sun.

Balancing on bamboo poles, two workers arrange the fresh catch.

A young worker carefully arranges dried fish.



A young man arranges fish under the sun, following techniques taught by elders.

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MALAYSIA

Stateless Waters

Photos by Zon Hisham

In the crystalline waters of the Celebes Sea, the Bajau Laut live suspended between nations. Known as "Sea Gypsies," they dwell in stilt houses and traditional boats, maintaining a connection to the ocean so profound it is written in their genetics; studies reveal they possess larger spleens for endurance diving.

Though modern borders and conservation pressures encroach, their culture endures – rooted not in land, but in a profound, living relationship with the sea.



Two young girls with Borak in their faces. This thick paste of ground rice and turmeric is a vital shield against the sun's reflection off the water.



A boy wears traditional hand-carved goggles. In the absence of modern gear, these wooden instruments allow the community to master the reefs that serve as both their playground and their primary source of food.



Children use their home's foundations to leap into the ocean. In the absence of land-based infrastructure, the Bajau Laut youth turn the open water into a limitless arena for playing.



Within the narrow confines of a barebones kitchen, a woman prepares food.



A young boy prepares a Sea Urchin shell, a Bajau delicacy where rice is cooked in the shell, for Tehe Tehe.



A mother and son in a traditional dugout canoe. The mastery of these small, hand-carved boats is the only way to move between neighbors or reach the shore.

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CAMBODIA

The Pulse of Tonle Sap

Photos by Joan de la Malla

Every year, the Tonle Sap expands and retreats, dictating the rhythm of life for thousands living on its waters. Communities, including many ethnic Cham, drift with the shifting currents, their floating homes and temples adapting to the lake's pulse. Here, identity is inseparable from the water; children paddle before they walk, and daily survival relies on the flood.

Yet, this fluid existence is under threat. Upstream dams, erratic monsoons, and pollution are disrupting the lake's ancient cycles. As the water changes, the communities struggle with maintaining the balance between their heritage and a shifting environment.



A woman weaves baskets from dried water hyacinth, an invasive plant threatening the lake's ecosystems. In Prek Toal, women transform it into crafts, generating income, strengthening community roles, and helping manage the environment.



Paddling is an essential skill that children learn from a very young age. They learn to row at the same time they learn to walk, and boats are an integral part of daily life. In this photo, at sunrise, girls make their way to school in Prek Toal.



Living a nomadic life on the water comes with challenges, such as limited access to fresh vegetables. For this reason, people organize floating gardens to grow their own food.

Tonle Sap is a vast lake that hosts a wide variety of ecosystems, including seasonally flooded forests. These forests are the nurseries for the world's most productive freshwater fisheries. In Kompong Phluk, a woman navigates by memory through the intricate maze of the flooded forest.



Fishing is the primary livelihood for lake communities, supplying both daily food and income.



The modest floating houses shelter hundreds of families across the communities (this image is in Phat Sanday commune). Today they rely on solar panels for electricity and use barrels and other flotation structures to keep their homes above water.



The economy of Tonle Sap lake relies on processing millions of small trey riell ('money fish'). They are often turned into prahok, a fermented fish paste.

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THE 2026/2027 CONTEST

Walk of Water: ¡Viva!

Onewater invites you to partner for our 6th Annual Photo Contest: Walk of Water, convened in strategic partnership with the UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme. This is not just a photography competition; it is a global advocacy engine, aligned with the UN World Water Development Report and packed with powerful stories capable of reshaping global water conversations.

ENHANCE YOUR VISIBILITY at esteemed venues such as the UN/UNESCO headquarters, universities, and museums. Your brand will be featured prominently across all contest materials and exhibitions. Past contests made it to the Guardian, New Scientist, FAZ, 8world and dozens of other outlets.

ACCESS ORIGINAL IMAGERY from an archive of over 30,000+ photographs, including those taken by Sony and/or World Press Photo Award winners. Use unique content for corporate, promotional, or non-commercial purposes.

FUEL GLOBAL DIALOGUE with the best stories and bring crucial water issues to the forefront. Help us enable new content, expanding the reach of the contest and amplifying its message.

For more information:
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¡VIVA!

2026/2027



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