

# Film as a Catalyst for Water Science Communication and Socio-Ecological Engagement: Lessons from Let's Talk About Water (Oral)

Linda Lilienfeld<sup>1\*</sup>

*<sup>1</sup>Founder and Director, Let's Talk About Water, New York City, United States*

*\*Corresponding author: [linda.lilienfeld@gmail.com](mailto:linda.lilienfeld@gmail.com)*

## ABSTRACT

A structural gap undermines water management globally: scientists are institutionally discouraged from public communication, fearing misinterpretation of their data, while water managers and communities lack access to scientific knowledge in usable, actionable form. Collecting more data is not enough, that data must be explained clearly, accessibly, and in ways applicable to real-time decision-making. Let's Talk About Water (LTAW) was founded 25 years ago precisely to bridge water science and water policy through film. This presentation makes the case for film as a strategic, scalable tool for water science communication, with a specific focus on its untapped potential for Africa.

LTAW operates through three interconnected mechanisms: curated film screenings paired with expert dialogue, structured short film competitions open to both filmmakers and scientists, and institutional partnerships that embed film within major scientific and policy events. Over 25 years, LTAW has collaborated with CUAHSI (NSF-funded consortium of US universities), TU Delft and Deltares in the Netherlands, UNESCO's Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme (IHP), the Global Network of Water Museums (WAMU-NET), and the World Water Assessment Programme. Competitions, each drawing approximately 250 entries and evaluated by curated expert juries — have addressed Latin American water stories, Arid Lands and Ancient Hydro Technologies (AHTs), and most recently glaciers, serving as the official launch platform for the UN Decade of Action for Cryospheric Sciences.

LTAW's reach now spans five continents. Recent milestones include the 3rd Annual Let's Talk About Water Film Festival in Paris; screenings at UNESCO headquarters for World Water Day and the International Year of Glaciers' Preservation; participation in COP30 in Belém, Brazil, with water utilities stakeholders; screenings at the Luxor African Film Festival; and an upcoming showcase at the Rotterdam Arabic Film Festival (June 2026). Critically, short film competitions have proven particularly effective at engaging young people, a generation that responds to visual storytelling far more readily than to scientific publications or policy reports.

LTAW's next film competition will focus explicitly on Water in Africa and Water for Africa, a direct response to the urgent hydro-climatic, socio-ecological and governance challenges facing African river basins. This presentation invites the ICAR 2026 scientific community to take three concrete steps: first, to formally recognize science communication as an integral part of hydrological research; second, to partner with LTAW in co-designing the Africa water film competition, ensuring it reflects the scientific priorities of the African river community; and third, to champion film-based outreach within their own institutions, universities and basin management bodies. Where data informs, film connects, and in Africa's most water-vulnerable communities, that connection can be the difference between policy that is written and policy that is lived.

**Keywords:** water communication, film education, Africa water challenges, science-society dialogue, youth engagement