

A photograph of a white-barked tree, likely a Yucca, growing in a red, cracked earth landscape. The tree's reflection is visible in a pool of water in the foreground. The background shows more of the cracked earth and some distant trees.

Water Is Family: A Kanyini Ethics for a Thirsting Planet

Moving beyond 'resource management' to relational responsibility.
Based on the teachings of Yankunytjatjara Elder Bob Randall.

The Category Error

THE CURRENT VIEW: WATER AS RESOURCE

An object to be
measured, extracted,
owned, and traded.



THE KANYINI VIEW: WATER AS KIN

A living relative to
whom we owe
responsibility.



Decisions about allocation are always decisions about what water is.



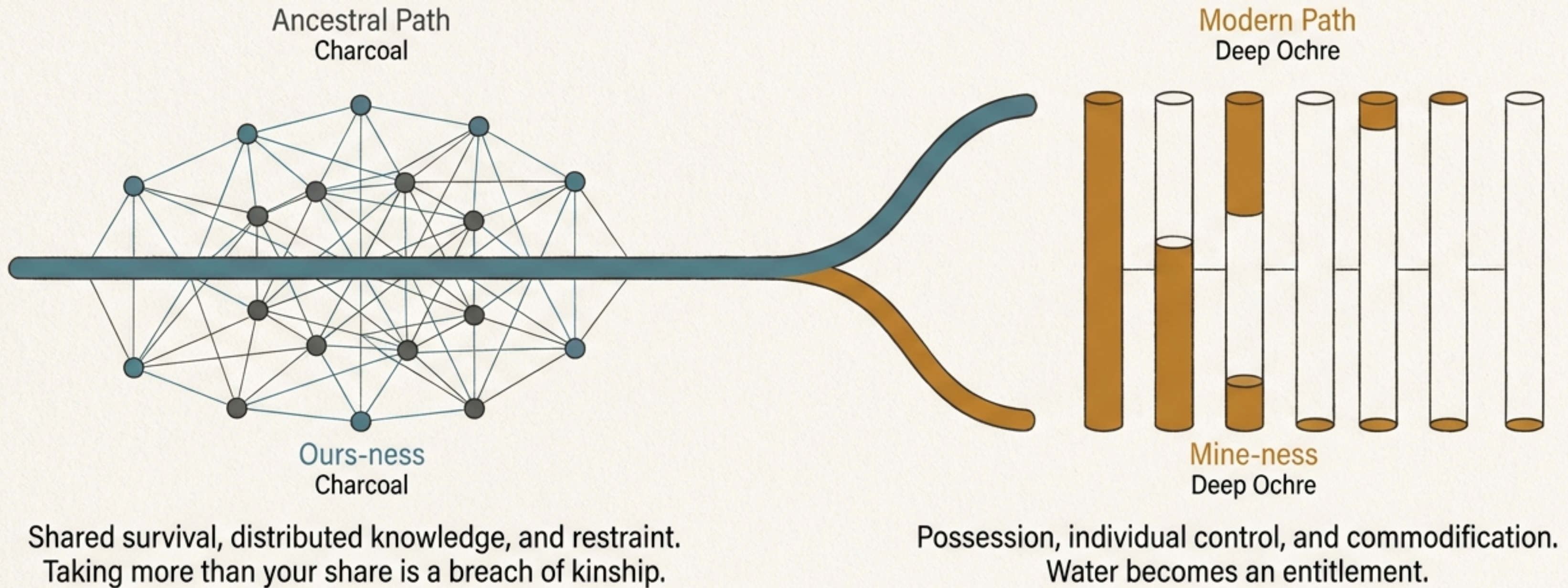
Kanyini is Law, Not Just Emotion

Elder Bob Randall defines Kanyini as “responsibility and unconditional love for all of creation.” It is not a value you choose; it is a law you follow.

The Binding Rules:

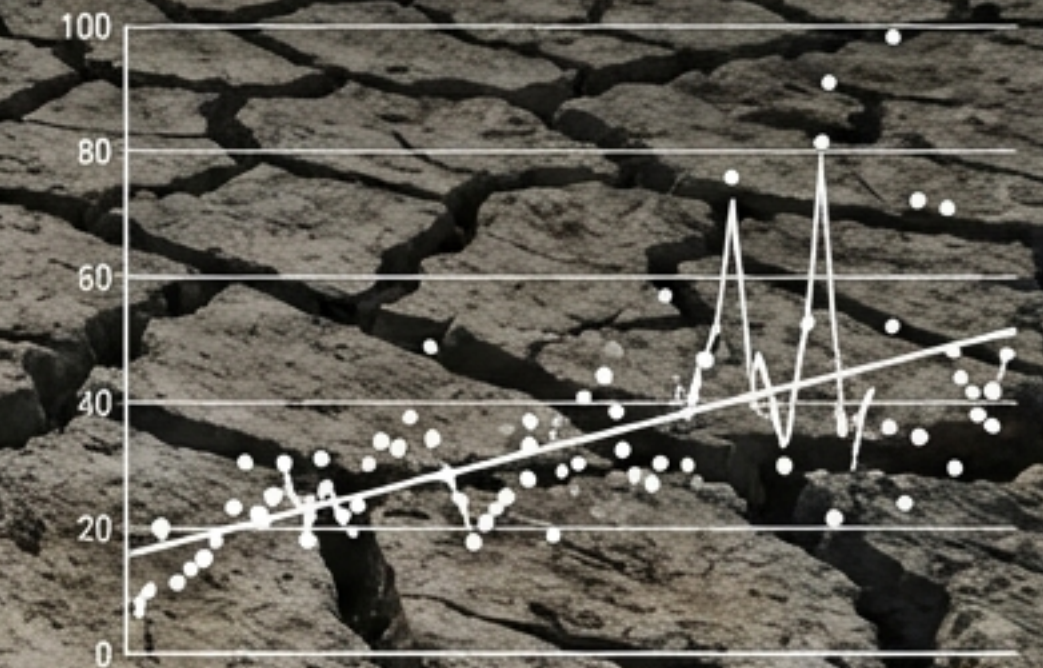
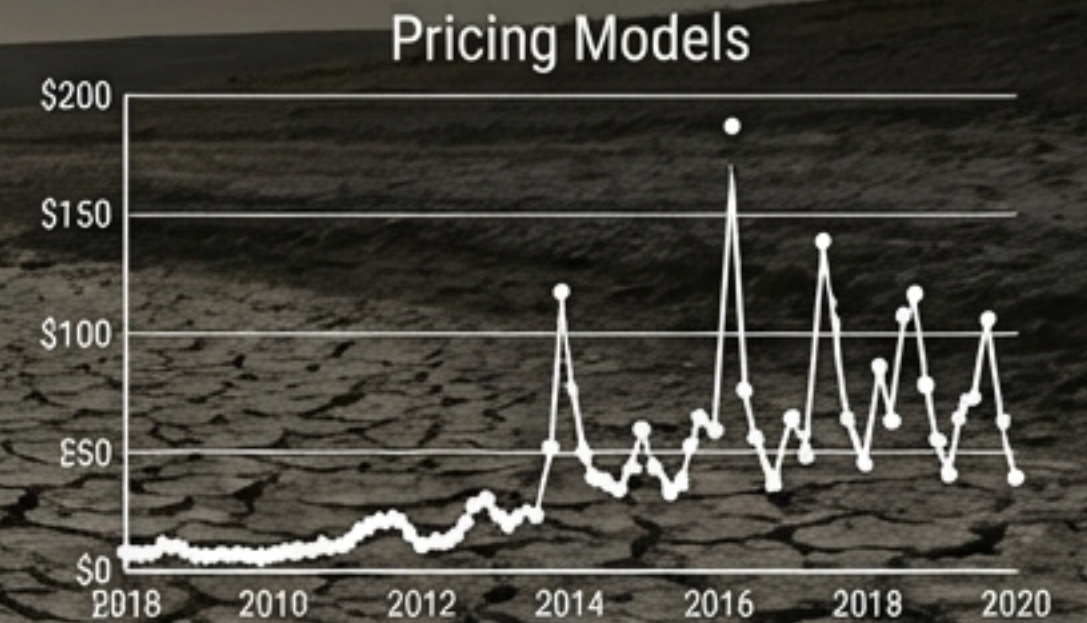
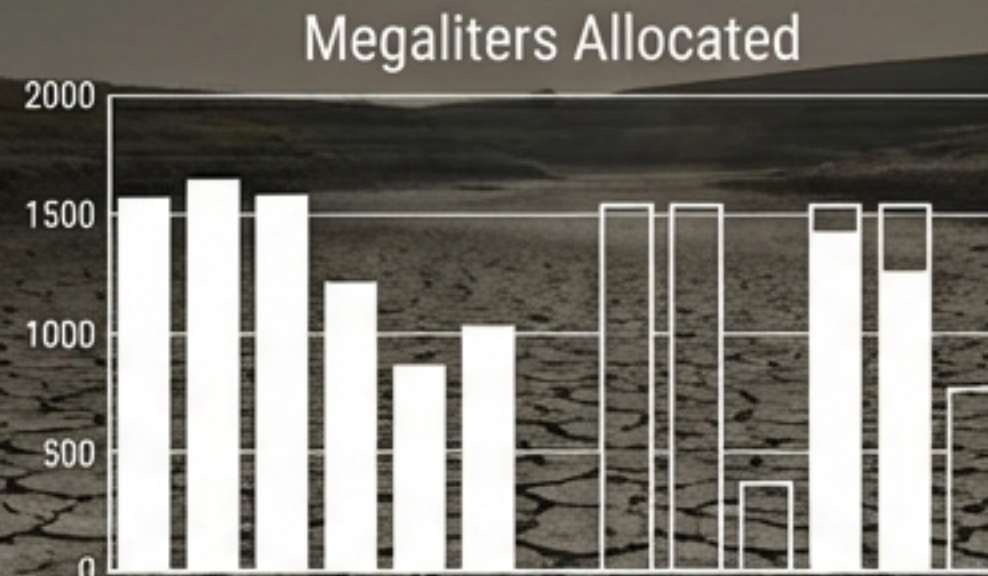
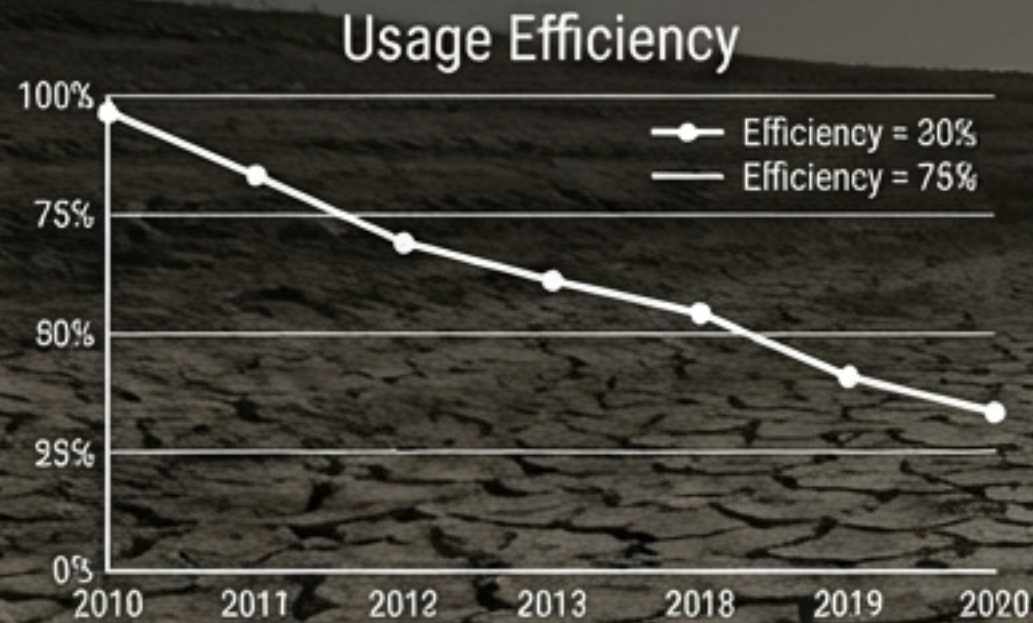
- **Presence implies Obligation:** Where water exists, responsibility exists.
- **Continuity:** Responsibility is intergenerational and non-transferable.
- **Unconditionality:** Care does not depend on benefit or convenience.

The Rupture in Relationship



The Shift: We moved from a web of relations to a marketplace of objects.

When Management Breaks Kanyini



The Limitation: We manage scarcity, flows, and rights, but we ignore relationship.

The Consequence: Responsibility is externalized to markets or deferred to the future.

The Verdict: Technically sophisticated regimes continue to produce depletion.

The Double Drought

“Living without love is like a spiritual drought.” — Bob Randall

Physical drought (lack of rain) and spiritual drought (lack of care) are linked.
A water system fails not just when it runs dry, but when it permits extraction without accountability.



The Rainbow Serpent: Law in Motion



PRESENCE

Water doesn't just "go away." It is always present as Law.

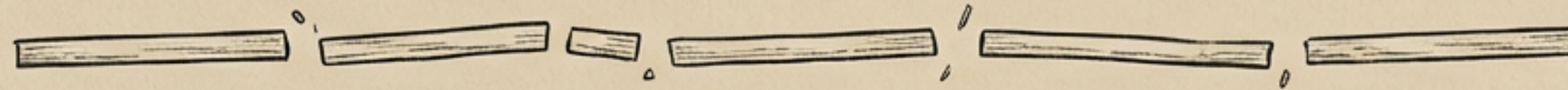
MEMORY

Water carries the history of how it was treated. It is not neutral.

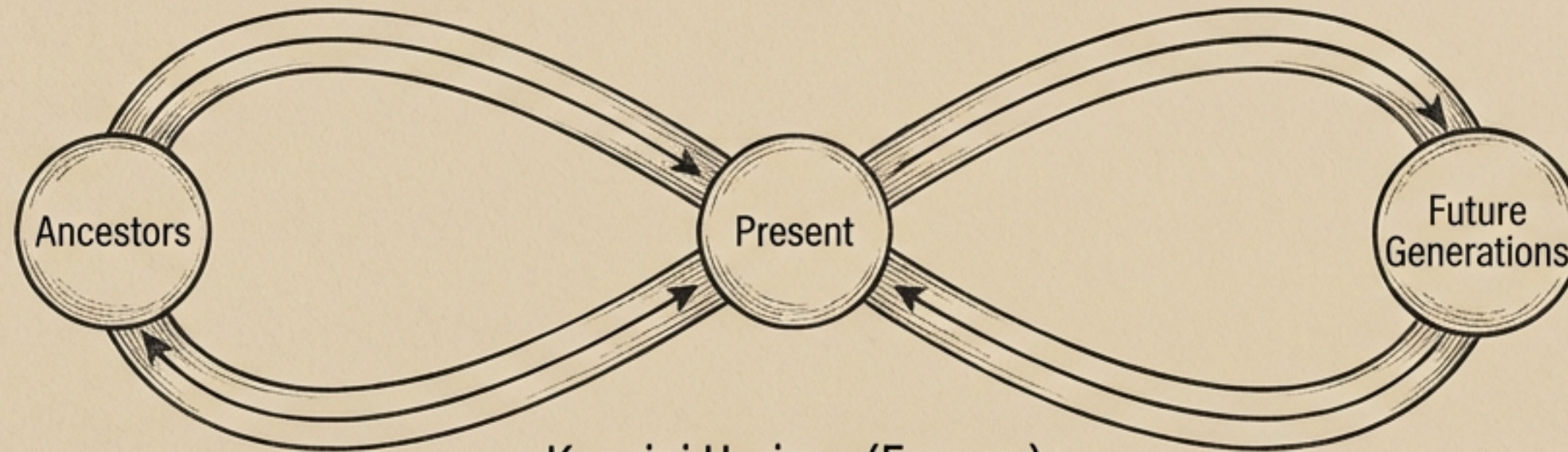
CONTINUITY

"I will always be here if ever you need me." A legal assurance, provided responsibility is kept.

Responsibility Across Time



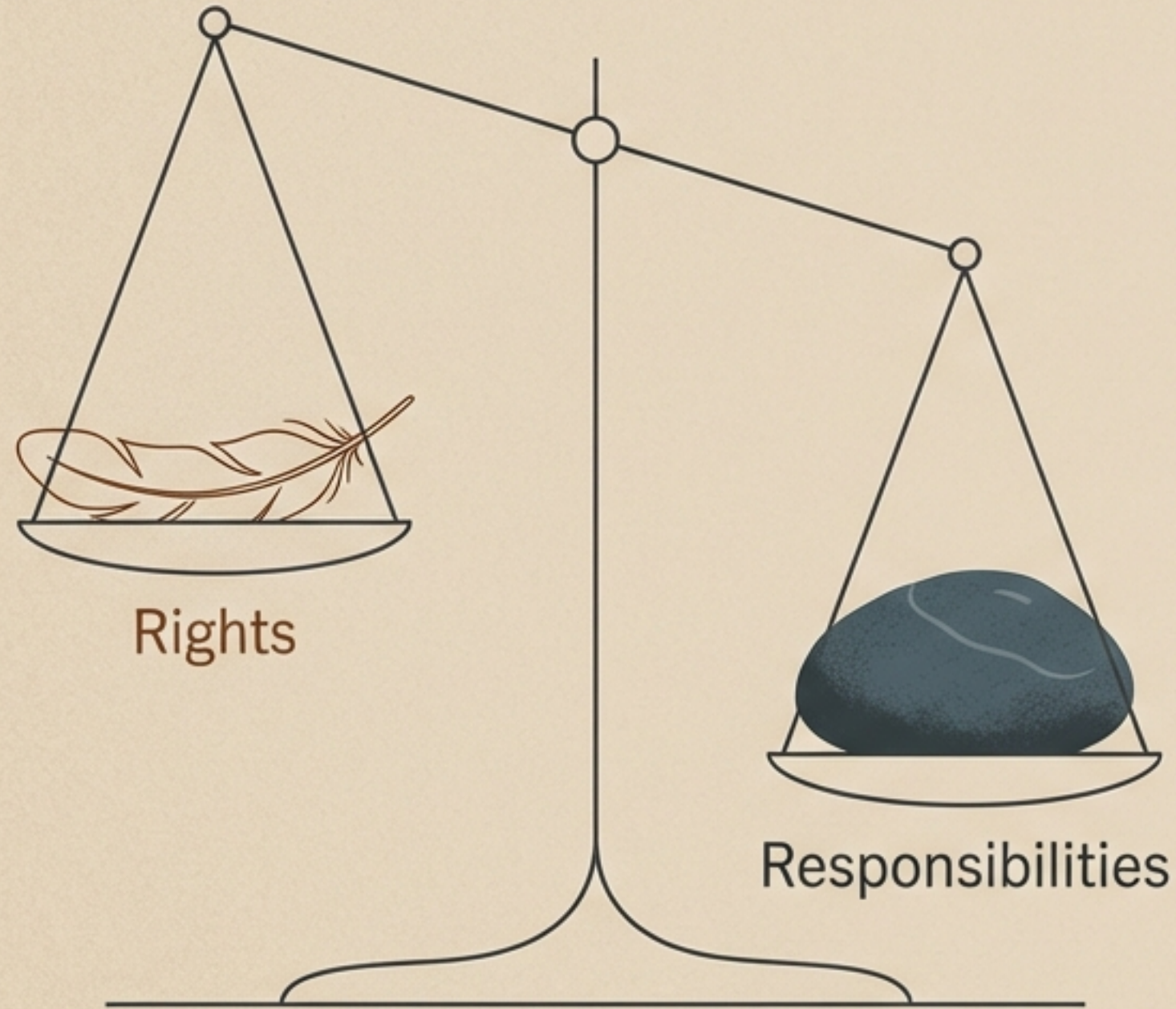
Standard Governance (5-10 Year Horizons)



Kanyini Horizon (Forever)

We must never be the generation that caused the drying up of our physical and spiritual water.
Policy Implication: Future generations are already present in the obligation to care for water now.
You cannot discount future harm for present gain.

Governance Principle 1: Responsibility Precedes Rights



Current Model:

“I have a right to X megaliters.”

Kanyini Model:

“I have a responsibility to sustain this source.”

The Policy Shift: Usage is contingent contingent on the capacity to care.
No responsibility = No access.

Governance Principle 2: Custodianship Over Ownership

OWNERSHIP



CUSTODIANSHIP

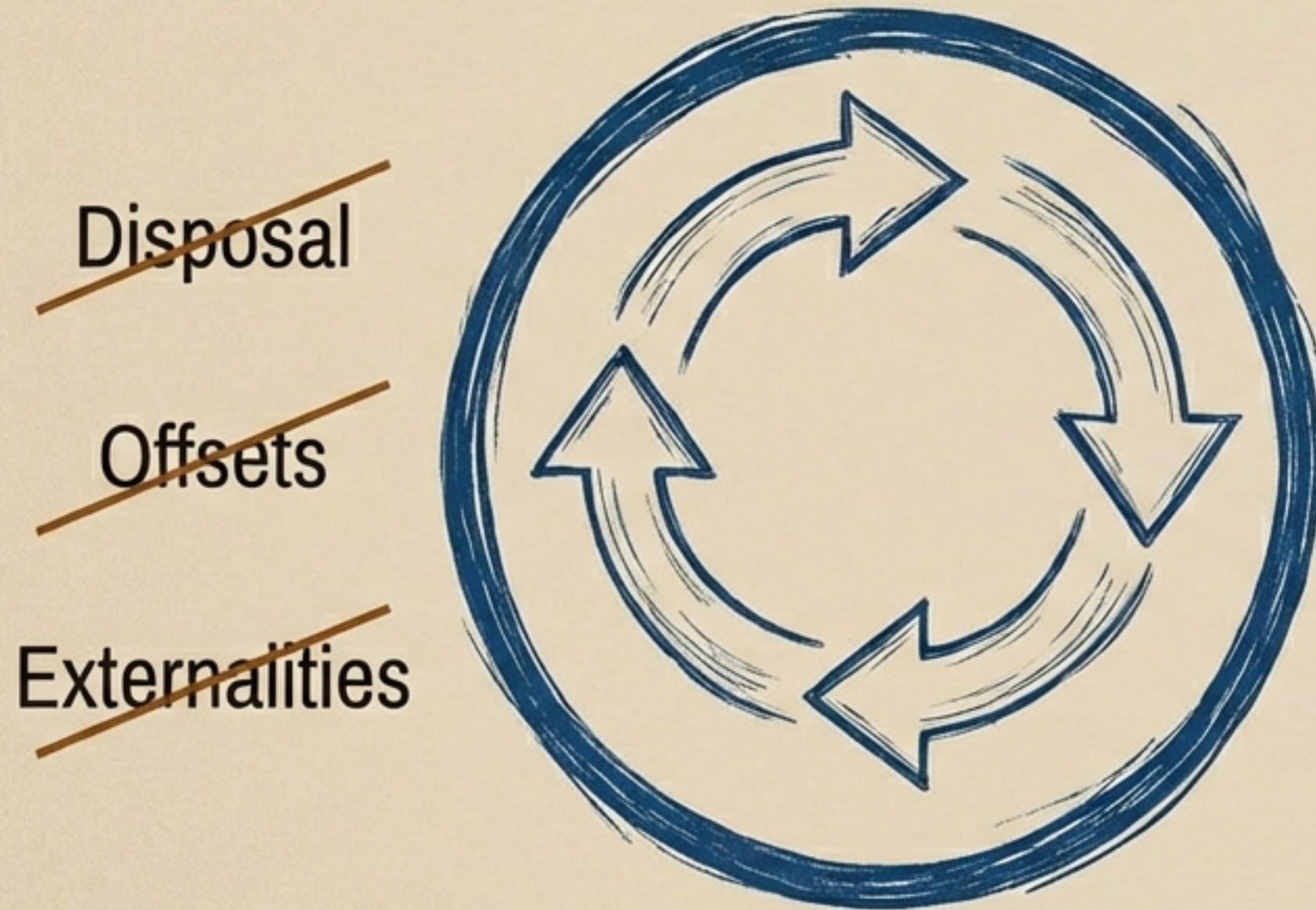


The Shift: Authority is exercised on behalf of the collective (human and non-human).

Accountability: Decision-makers must be those who live with the consequences.

Structure: Co-governance recognizing Indigenous custodianship not as stakeholders, but as authority.

Governance Principle 3: There Is No “Away”



The Myth: Discharge points and “offsets” end responsibility.

The Reality: Responsibility persists through the full cycle.

Policy Shift: You cannot outsource pollution. Harm cannot be “paid for”; it must be prevented.

Governance Principle 4: *All Life is Kin*



Current Model: Environmental flows are “leftovers” after economic use.

Kanyini Model: Ecological and cultural flows are primary.

Reasoning: To damage Country is to damage Family.

Governance is 'Digging Deep'



Love/Care is not a sentiment; it is work. Governance is the active, daily maintenance of relationship.

The Method:

- Restraint
- Attentiveness
- Listening (combining data with wisdom)

A Governance for Life

ONTOLOGY

Water is Family
(Not Resource).

TIME

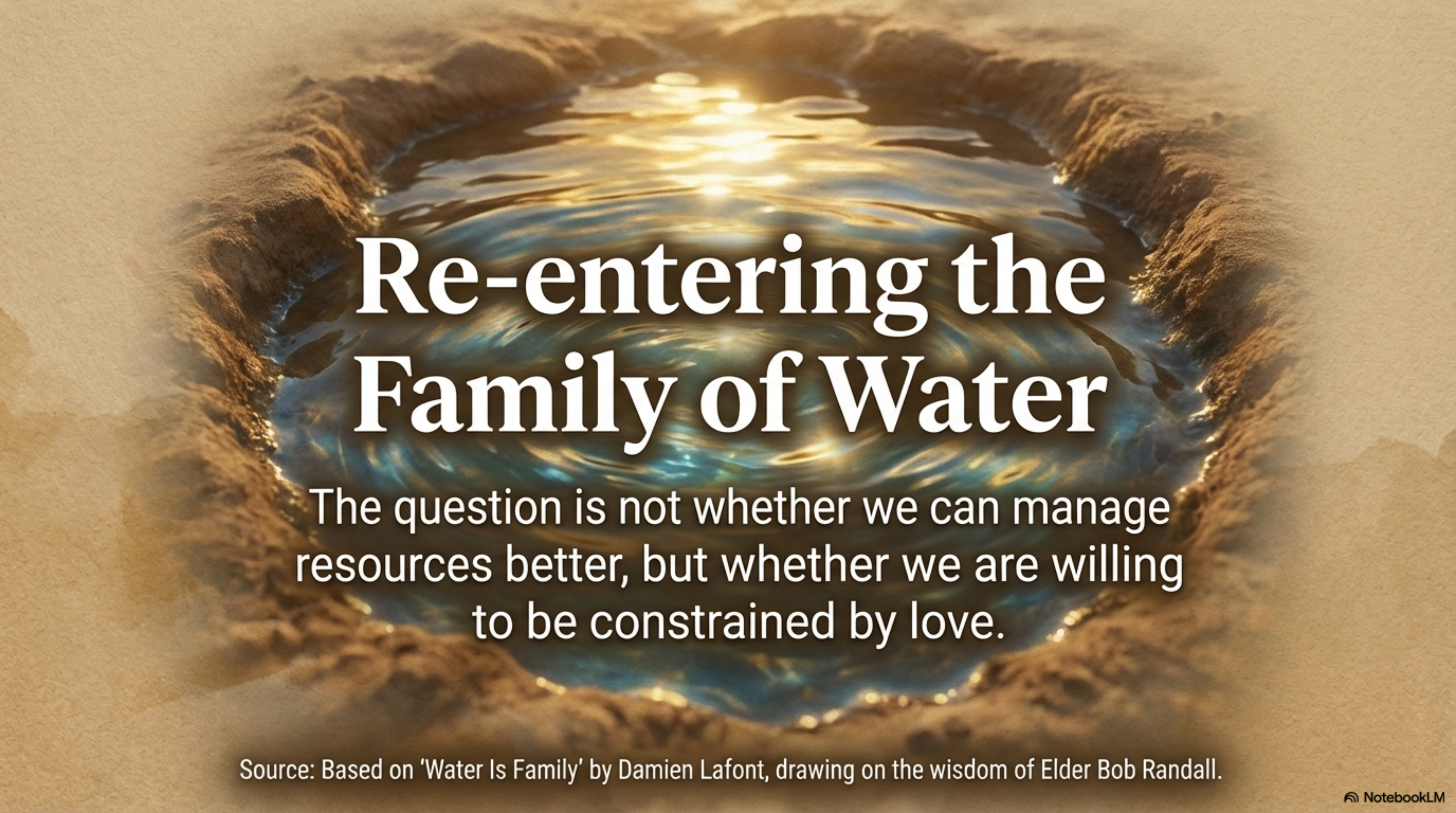
Responsibility is Forever
(Not Transferable).

AUTHORITY

Care is Custodial
(Not Possessive).

FLOW

Usage is Relational
(Not Transactional).



Re-entering the Family of Water

The question is not whether we can manage resources better, but whether we are willing to be constrained by love.

Source: Based on 'Water Is Family' by Damien Lafont, drawing on the wisdom of Elder Bob Randall.