

By Amanda Gordon September 25, 2012

Matt Damon's Major Role in Finding Clean Water for World

When Matt Damon gets thirsty on a movie set, he has a drinking container aligned with his philanthropic mission.

"I have my Water.org bottle. It's silver, with our little logo," Damon said in an interview at Bloomberg News world headquarters in New York.



Gary White, co-founder and CEO, Water.org, and Matt Damon, co-founder of Water.org, on their visit to Bloomberg world headquarters in New York.



Sept. 25 (Bloomberg) -- Matt Damon, co-founder of Water.org, and Gary White, co-founder and chief executive officer, talk about their nonprofit organization's efforts to provide access to "clean water and sanitation for everyone on Earth in our lifetime." They spoke with Bloomberg News reporter Amanda Gordon in New York on Sept. 20. (Source: Bloomberg)

Damon co-founded Water.org -- based in Kansas City, Missouri -- in 2009 with Gary White, who serves as the nonprofit's chief executive. White, an engineer, had 20 years of experience working on the issue. Their goal is "access to clean water and sanitation for everyone on earth in our lifetime," Damon said.

At next year's Clinton Global Initiative's annual conference, Damon and White plan to announce that they have made good on a 2009 pledge to bring clean water and sanitation to 50,000 people in Haiti.

"I talked to a little girl in Haiti when we were down there earlier in the year," Damon said, describing a village project that spared the 13-year-old from hauling water. "In the found time when she wasn't going to go to collect water, she was actually going to have time to play."

According to the Water.org website, "every 20 seconds, a child dies from a water-related illness."

One of the chief components of Damon's organization is WaterCredit, which provides microloans to help people obtain access to water.

Potential Customers

"The conventional wisdom is that all poor people are too poor to pay for water services," White said sitting alongside Damon in the interview. "We see the poor as potential customers who have intrinsic power. A microloan gives a water connection so they don't have to go to a loan shark."

"The management consulting firm that we've worked with has estimated that there are 100 million people that can be reached by this by 2020," Damon said. "That's incredible when you're talking 700 million to 800 million people that don't have access to water."

The idea that something like WaterCredit really works is what drew Damon, a quality he says many Americans find attractive.

"It was a place where I felt I could potentially have a really big impact on improving people's lives," he said. "There's a lot of low-hanging fruit out there."



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Water.org's model is to work with outside organizations, from the corporate foundations of PepsiCo Inc. (PEP) and Caterpillar Inc. (CAT) to local NGOs to commercial lending institutions to the outfitter Camel-Bak Products LLC, the maker of the Water.org bottle. From the sale of every bottle, \$10 goes to Water.org.

New Ventures

The program is also committed to trying new ideas. Its New Ventures Fund, started to raise capital to test solutions, has \$4 million so far toward a \$10 million goal. Contributors include Michael Birch, creator of the social network Bebo, which he sold to AOL Inc. (AOL) One of the fund's projects is a program in Haiti to offer information on clean-water sources through mobile phones.

There is a necessary element of risk in such ventures, Damon said.

"Harvard Business Review just put out an article about this that actually broke it down," he said. "You want 70 percent to be your core business, 20 percent to be adjacencies to that and 10 percent to be highest risk. Funnily enough, they say it pays off exactly inverse to that."

White said that for him there was a necessary "emotional connection" to Water.org's work.

Emotional Connection

"I think people shouldn't be afraid to be led by their hearts, but they have to bring their heads along," White said. "It's OK to say, this is an emotional connection for me but how can I do it catalytically? How can I do it smarter? How can I make sure that my philanthropy is invested in a way that's going to have a bigger impact?"

Damon himself got a slow start working on the issue.

"I had produced a documentary about people running across the Sahara desert, these ultra-marathoners, and had used it as a chance to identify NGOs that were doing good work around water," he said. "My idea was to partner with these local communities, with these groups we vetted.

"At any rate, we were raising funds and directing them to the NGOs basically for well projects. As I learned more about it I started to realize there were these other incredibly innovative solutions that actually had a much better chance of solving the problem."

His next step: "I finally said, can somebody please introduce me to the world's foremost expert on this, who's actually doing something about it. That guy wasn't available," Damon said, laughing and clearly enjoying the joke on his partner. "But they introduced me to Gary."