



MARCH 2013

THE *HEMI* Q&A

# Matt Damon

One of Hollywood's biggest earners has become one of the world's leading advocates for clean water. We sit down with him to discuss his efforts with Water.org—plus, what it's like to be yelled at by an irate John Krasinski and smacked repeatedly on the head by a 2-year-old.

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## THE HEMI Q&A: MATT DAMON

**LIKE A LOT OF CELEBRITIES**, Matt Damon has his pet causes. In contrast to many of his peers, though, he actually digs in and does the work. And in Damon's world, there is nothing more important than clean water. As co-founder of Water.org, which helps poor communities build their own water supply systems, he's determined to see that fresh water is available to the millions who don't have it. That sounds far-fetched in a Hollywood-movie sort of way, but Water.org is intent on harnessing market forces to make wholesale gains, rather than just drilling a few more wells.

Of course, in his spare time Damon continues to tend to his career as one of Hollywood's most bankable stars. I met him at the Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan late last year, when he was in town doing press for *Promised Land*, the Gus Van Sant indie he wrote with John Krasinski ("The Office") about one community's struggles over letting a big energy company set up a fracking operation. (Damon's prowess as an author is proven; recall that his sole Oscar is for co-writing *Good Will Hunting*.) And he was fresh off receiving a career achievement award at the Gotham Independent Film Awards in New York City—a notable accomplishment, given that he's only 42.

With his hair cropped short for a role as a soldier in the futuristic *Elysium* (due out in August), and wearing a pair of glasses that could have been right off the drugstore rack, Damon looked like a mighty regular guy when we met. Over a couple of bottles of water, we talked about, well, water, then *Promised Land*, balancing career and family, and, finally, temporary baldness. Among folks who cover the famous, Damon is considered the gold standard: smart, funny, nice, always plays ball. This interview was no exception.

**GOODWILL HUNTING** Damon and Water.org's Gary White with youngsters in Haiti; onstage at the Gotham Awards; with *Promised Land* collaborators John Krasinski and Gus Van Sant





WATER.ORG (HAIIT); THEO WARGO/GETTY (AWARDS); AMANDA EDWARDS/WIREIMAGE (PROMISED LAND)

**HEMISPHERES:** *For a big name such as yourself, there are plenty of good causes on which to expend celebrity capital. What made you think you could put a dent in the world's water problems?*

**DAMON:** The enormity of it. Water underpins everything. My personal connection started when I went on a water collection with a 14-year-old girl in Zambia, and she grabbed her jerrican and we walked a mile to the well. It was a long walk, and we talked about all the things she could be doing if she didn't have to walk so far to get water.

**HEMISPHERES:** *Which one of you carried the can back?*

**DAMON:** She did, like it was nothing. I was in Ethiopia a couple of years ago, and there was an 8-year-old girl who lifted one of these cans and started walking up a hill. I said, "Give me that thing," took it and tried to walk up.

**During a mile-long hike to a well with a Zambian girl, "we talked about all the things she could be doing if she didn't have to walk so far to get water."**

I was in shape—I was doing *Invictus*, which was a rugby movie—and it was hard. That kid weighed a third of what I weighed. It was amazing what she went through to get water.

**HEMISPHERES:** *But water has a bit of a marketing problem. Because it's so abundant here, people can't imagine how big a deal it is in sub-Saharan Africa. In terms of global issues, AIDS actually has more traction in the public consciousness.*

**DAMON:** Yeah, because everybody knows, or has known, somebody with AIDS. My wife's father died of it. It touches people in a very personal way. The first hurdle we have to clear is trying to explain to the public that there are 780 million people who don't have access to clean and safe water, that every 21 seconds a kid under the age of 5 dies from a water-related disease. It just doesn't make sense to people. There's clean water in this room; there's clean water all over the West. We've known how to access clean water for a hundred years. We've figured that out. Now it's a matter of making sure that it extends to everyone.

**HEMISPHERES:** *It's not like people aren't trying to get it done.*

**DAMON:** Sure, but half of all water projects fail. There are massive inefficiencies in the space. That's one of the things I love about Gary White, who runs Water.org. Digging wells won't solve the problem. We'll never be able to dig enough wells. So Gary invented this idea of "water credit," which is really brilliant. It helps turn people into customers, and uses the power of the market to access existing resources. **CONTINUED ON PAGE 134 »**

## WATER.ORG BY THE NUMBERS

Global population  
**7 BILLION**

Number of people without  
access to clean water  
**780 MILLION**

Estimated number of hours they  
spend collecting water each day  
**200 MILLION**

Number of people without  
adequate sanitation services  
**2.5 BILLION**

Percentage of illnesses in  
developing nations related  
to unsafe drinking water and  
poor sanitation  
**80**

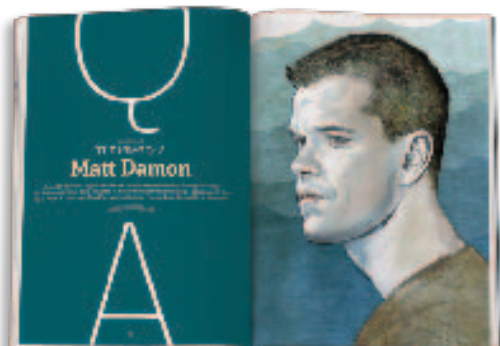
Average amount of water,  
in gallons, used daily by a person  
in a developing nation  
**2.6**

Average amount of water,  
in gallons, used daily by a  
person in the U.S.  
**100**

Amount of loans made through  
Water.org's microfinance program,  
WaterCredit  
**\$9.2 MILLION**

Number of people served by  
WaterCredit projects worldwide  
**500,000+**

Number of people that WaterCredit  
aims to benefit by 2020  
**100 MILLION**



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Oftentimes in West Africa or sub-Saharan Africa, which is the epicenter of the bad-water epidemic, the municipalities are piping water right under the street but little of it gets to people's homes because they don't have taps. Gary's idea is that you give the people a water credit in the form of a \$100 loan, and they connect to the pipes and have a tap put in their home. And then hopefully they'll come back for another loan and put a latrine in their house.

**HEMISPHERES:** *Do you think of water as a human right?*

**DAMON:** Yes. It's a necessity to survive, yet we seem to take it for granted in the West because it costs so little. But when you go to a community where they don't have it—yeah, it's obviously a human right.

**HEMISPHERES:** *Promised Land is not a long walk from the subject of water, given that there's a fair amount of controversy over the environmental impacts of fracking. Where did the movie come from?*

**DAMON:** It was John Krasinski's idea. He went to the writer Dave Eggers, who he knew from *Away We Go*, and Dave, who I'm a huge admirer of, came up with the story. And then Dave got busy with his book, *A Hologram for the King*, and John and I decided to write the movie ourselves. I was also going to direct, but ...

**HEMISPHERES:** *But?*

**DAMON:** It was December and I was finishing doing press on *We Bought a Zoo*. I had run late on another movie, and I had been away from my kids for a long, long time. I looked at the schedule after I got home and realized that I would have to go into preproduction in a few weeks for *Promised Land* and leave my kids yet again. I couldn't do it. So I called John and I told him. He was pretty angry, and he had a right to be. He said, "You couldn't have told me this a month ago? We can't even get our agent on the phone, and everyone is gone for the holidays."

I just kept apologizing to him, even though I knew it was the right thing to do. I knew that directing the movie half-distracted would be a disaster. It wouldn't serve the picture, so I walked away from it. But I said, "I still want to do the movie, I love our movie, and you have to trust me. The script is good; we're going to get a director." Luckily, the next morning I emailed Gus Van Sant, one of my all-time favorites, and he read it right away and said yes right away. It was a 12-hour hiccup, but a tough one.

**HEMISPHERES:** *Gus directed Good Will Hunting, which turned out pretty well. And meanwhile your co-star in that movie, Ben Affleck, has made a little film ...*

**DAMON:** Yeah, *Argo* is just amazing. I'm so happy for him. And I'm not surprised—I know better than anybody how talented he is. I've known him for 30 years, and wrote a movie with him, and spent a lot of time talking to him.

It's great to see how well received this movie was. And deservedly so. It's a phenomenal movie.

**HEMISPHERES:** *You received a career tribute the other night at the Gotham Awards. Is it really tribute time? How old are you?*

**DAMON:** I'm 42. I completely agree. I didn't even know what to say to that. I'm trying to get a little \$18 million movie out there, so I'm like, "Yeah, sure, I'll go to the Gotham Awards." It's still a little weird. I thought, "Does this mean you're telling me I can't work anymore? Are you putting me out to pasture?"

**HEMISPHERES:** *You're not ready for the pasture. We need you to save the world by making another Bourne movie.*

**DAMON:** I'm tied to the director, Paul Greengrass, and if Paul wants to do it, then I will too.

**HEMISPHERES:** *The poster for Elysium has you holding a gun so big it looks like a cannon. Did you have to work out to be able to hold that thing up?*

**DAMON:** It's not that bad. They're special-effects guns, so they're not super-heavy. But my character had a shaved head and he was really built, with tattoos all over him, so going to the gym three or four hours a day was a big thing in getting ready for that movie.

**HEMISPHERES:** *What do your kids think of the haircut?*

**DAMON:** My 2-year-old loves smacking my head when it's bald. It had grown back a bit, but then I had two days of reshoots and they said, "You can wear a bald cap, but you're going to be in the makeup chair for an extra three hours in the morning." So I said no way, and cut it all off again. I'm just happy it seems to be growing back.

**DAVID CARR**, who covers media and culture for The New York Times, is intrigued by the idea of an irate John Krasinski.