



Water, Water Everywhere, But Not if You're Poor

"The battles of yesterday were fought over land... Those of the present center on oil. But those of the future—a future made hotter and drier by climate change in much of the world—seem likely to focus on water..."

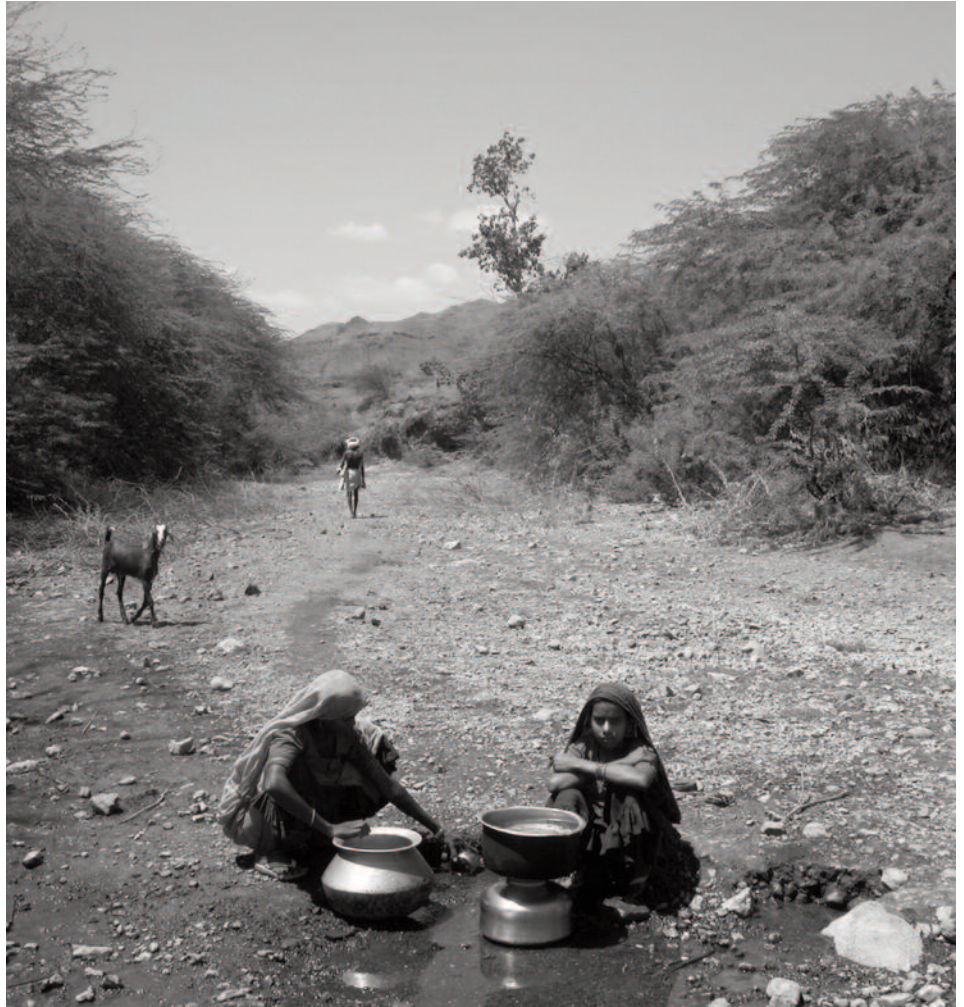
—The New York Times, June 3, 2008

As the world population grows by nearly 80 million people a year, demand for fresh water increases by 64 billion cubic meters, threatening a supply that is fickle at best.

Water covers 71% of the earth's surface, but only 2.5% of it is fresh (not salty). More than two-thirds of the fresh water supply is trapped in glaciers, which are melting into the ocean at an alarming pace. What we're left with is a very small supply of accessible fresh water, much of which is polluted and unfit for human or animal consumption.

Water is the foundation upon which much of modern society is built, starting with agriculture, which consumes as much as 90% of the total supply in some areas. Water is also an important source of energy. Hydropower dams harness power from moving water and coal and nuclear power plants require water for cooling. Lastly, water provides the sanitation that has facilitated great leaps in life expectancy over the past century. Indoor plumbing keeps people clean and sends harmful waste away from their living space—a luxury that more than a third of people on earth still do not have.

Water scarcity is a problem that does not discriminate against race, religion, or sexual orientation. It does, however, discriminate against the poor. As the saying goes in the American West, "Water usually runs downhill, but it always runs uphill to money." There are nearly 1.2 billion people who do not have access to clean water and more than 2.6 billion people who suffer from inadequate sanitation. One alarming result of that fact is that 1.6 million children die from diarrhea-related



Villagers collecting water from the nearest water source for their drinking purposes at a village in Madhya Pradesh, Central India. Photo: G. Pattabiraman, Courtesy of Photoshare

causes each year—deaths that are wholly preventable and would never occur among the wealthy.

Water in the United States

Georgia is grasping at straws to provide adequate water to its residents. The state has been growing at 2% a year since the 1990s, making it the fifth fastest-growing state in the nation. State Senate and House resolutions introduced in February dispute the location of the bor-

der with Tennessee, drawn in 1818. If the Supreme Court rules in Georgia's favor, the border will be moved about one mile north of where it is today, allowing The Peach State access to the Tennessee River. Georgia has been battling Florida and Alabama for two decades over similar qualms with border locations. A recent poll found that 87% of Georgians are concerned about water security.

The Colorado River Basin, which is a major water supplier to Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada

and California, has been in drought conditions for nine years, reducing the water supply tremendously. City planners are denying building permits to developers in California because plans do not comply with the requirement that there be at least a 20-year supply of water in the vicinity. The California Delta—where the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers meet—was constructed 50 years ago for a much smaller population; the massive, unexpected growth in the last half-century has caused many problems. And the Californian population is expected to continue growing from 38 million today to 45 million in 2020.

Peter Binney, water manager in Aurora, Colorado, worries about providing water for his city, which is expected to grow from 310,000 today to over 500,000 by 2035. “We have to find a new way of meeting the needs of all this population that’s turning up and still satisfy all of our recreational and environmental demands.”

When a journalist asked Pat Mulroy, head of the Southern Nevada Water Authority, whether limiting growth in Las Vegas would ease the pressure on local water sources, she responded, “This country is going to have 100 million additional people in it in the next 25 to 30 years. Tell me where they’re supposed to go. Seriously. Every community says, ‘Not here,’ ‘No growth here,’ ‘There’s too many people here already.’ For a large urban area that is the core economic hub of any particular area, to even attempt to throw up walls? I’m not sure it can be done.’ We have an exploding human population, and we have a shrinking clean-water supply. Those are on colliding paths. This is not just a Las Vegas issue. This is a microcosm of a much larger issue.”

International Water Shortages

According to *The New York Times*, “China has about 7% of the world’s water resources and roughly 20% of the world’s population.” Compounding the droughts and pollution that have damaged city reservoirs, population growth has seriously challenged the inadequate water



In Bangladesh, a Garo tribal woman with her daughter carries water on her head from Chiring, a small hilly fountain. They are dependent on such natural water sources for domestic use. Photo: Amio Ascension/ Pathshala-Drik, Courtesy of Photoshare

supply of Beijing. Scientists worry that the aquifer below the North China Plain will be drained within 30 years. The exploding population has forced engineers to drill into the aquifer more than 600 feet to reach clean water.

Concerns are heightening over water scarcity in Egypt, a country that receives very little rain. Relying on the waters of the Nile River for agriculture and individual consumption means that Egypt overdraws its share of the river’s water each year. Still, the country must import more than half of its food supply because there is not enough water to irrigate the desert

and grow sufficient crops to feed its 90 million people. The Nile is nearly depleted when it reaches the Mediterranean Sea.

Yemen, with one of the highest fertility rates on earth, at 5.3 children per woman, is expected to be the first country to deplete its groundwater resources. Because of its desert location, Yemenis rely almost exclusively on groundwater for irrigation and personal consumption. In this nation where 45% of the population is living on less than \$2 a day, 40% of households are not connected to a water main. The women of these households trudge to the nearest wells up to four times a day to provide water for their families. An article in *Reuters* reported, “Unless Yemen confronts its population explosion head-on, nothing will improve, said Scoble, the water expert in Amran. “Maybe this generation could limit Yemen’s population to 28 or 30 million if they were really aggressive.”

Solutions

Desalination of ocean water is an option in some countries with the financial resources and appropriate terrain for extending pipes for transport to population centers. Drip irrigation is a water-conserving technique heavily used in Israel for agriculture. Water-saving gadgets and habits in the West can help curb water use by reducing waste.

Ultimately though, stabilizing the population is the only measure that will decrease the pressure on fresh water supplies for the long term.

Visit our website to learn more about the connections between population and environment and to sign up for action alerts. www.populationconnection.org

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Population Connection is America’s largest grassroots group advocating for progressive action to stabilize world population at a level that can be sustained by the Earth’s resources.