



We're running out of water!

With January and February being so wet (and who knows what March has to offer?) it may seem surprising that there could be a shortage of water. Yet the United Nations published a news statement in January that declared that the world has entered an era of 'global water bankruptcy'. The UN defines this as "a condition in which repeated crises become chronic states with persistent shortages or damages meaning that many water systems can no longer return to their historical baselines." This may not seem at first glance to have much relevance to us in the UK, especially when we have had so much rain recently. However, the water companies struggle to meet demand as new houses are built. Thames Water is determined to build a super-sized reservoir near Abingdon and there is on-going talk about having a water supply grid.

Across the world, water is drawn directly or indirectly from rivers, lakes, deep aquifers, wetlands, soils and glaciers. So much has been abstracted, and continues to be taken that these sources are no longer being replenished and have been irreparably damaged. Water has been drawn from very deep aquifers that take millions of years to fill so there is no realistic prospect of restoring them. The draining of water basins has dried out peat bogs that then shrink and no longer retain the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide. The full UN report states that over the last 50 years, the area of wetlands that have disappeared is seven times the total area of the UK, that is 410 million hectares. They calculate that the financial loss of ecological benefits is more than \$5.1 trillion.

When water is taken from aquifers, the ground starts to shrink. Half of the world's domestic water and more than 40 % of irrigation water comes from groundwater. This has caused the ground to sink: 5 % of the total land mass of the world is affected, some of which is in heavily populated areas. In some places the land is sinking by almost 25 cm per year. With climate change and consequent global warming, glaciers are melting fast. It is estimated that we have lost more than 30 % of total glacier mass since 1970. Glaciers feed into rivers and millions of people rely on those rivers for their water supply, for irrigation and hydro-electric power. The depleted supply means loss of water security.

In the UK we have experienced some degree of drought but this is nowhere as extreme on many parts of the world. Approximately 2 billion people live under almost permanent drought conditions. In part this is due to lack of rain but more to the changes in land use, loss of ground water and climate change. Cutting down of rain forest for cattle ranching changes not only the local climate but reduces rainfall across a wider area. The intensification of agriculture and industrialisation causes pollution of rivers and lakes, so the water is no longer safe to use for drinking or food production.

The world has a finite amount of water and very little of it is potable. There is roughly 1,386 billion cubic kilometres of water in the whole world. Of that, 97 % is too salty to use for drinking or farming, 3 % is fresh water but only 0.5 % is available for use. In the UK, although we have plenty of rain, the amount of useable water is very limited. In the South East region, the current population is 19 million, which increases to 28 million because of visitors, collectively using up to six billion litres of water per year. Most of this comes from underground aquifers that are usually replenished during the winter months. Thames Water has plans to build more reservoirs and to work with the other water companies to make better use of water, sharing resources through water transfer. All the water companies have been required to plan for the future to avoid a deficit in supply.

The Environment Agency predicts that there could be a supply deficit across all four nations of 5,000 M litres per day by 2055. In our area, the South East, between 2030 and 2055 we will need an extra 2,455 M litres per day. This is broken down as follows:

Public water supply (2312 M litres/day)

- Drought resilience 377 M litres/day
- Population change 424 M litres/day
- Environmental improvement 1,350 M litres/day
- Climate change 161 M litres/day

Industry/agriculture/power generation (143 M litres/day)

- Food, drink, chemicals, mineral products 40 M litres/day
- Agriculture (irrigation) 53 M litres/day
- Power generation 34 m litres/day
- Other 16 M litres/day

In order to meet this increased demand, we are going to have to improve the way we use our water resources. If we continue as we are, there will be significant environmental damage. River flows will be reduced, groundwater depleted, lakes, wetlands and estuaries will start drying up. If nothing is done, most of England, and especially the North, will experience serious water shortages by 2055. In our area (Kennet Valley), the deficit could be almost 37 %. On the other hand, if the population doesn't grow as much as predicted in our region, leakage is reduced by 60 %, households use 20 % less water and individuals only use 100 litres per day, we could have a 14 % water surplus.

Whilst the water companies have a lot of work to do, especially in reducing leakage, we, as households and individuals can play an important part in cutting demand. You are probably doing some of these already but take a little time to check out these from the Energy Saving Trust. If you have a water meter, you will be saving money too.

- Take a shower instead of a bath and spend less time in the shower. Get a shower timer and limit how long you take.
- Turn the tap off when brushing your teeth.
- Fill the kettle less and only boil as much water as you need at a time.
- Make sure that you use full loads for your dishwasher and washing machine, and avoid washing the dishes by hand.
- Reuse water when you can. If it's just rinse water, even soapy, it can be used in the garden.
- Get a water butt – particularly important as our summers tend to be drier.
- Maintain your appliances – fix dripping taps and cisterns, descale kettles and shower heads.
- Use water saving devices such as a water-saving shower head; fit a water aerator the kitchen tap – this saves water and makes rinsing more efficient.

There are other things you can do. For example, you can use the water from cooking vegetables or pasta to water plants (after it has cooled). The water contains useful nutrients. Are you a busy computer user, sending and saving lots of emails, doing lots of searches and using AI? The data centres rely on huge amounts of water to cool their systems. By 2030, 6 % of the UK's energy will be used to store emails. So cutting back on all of these saves water.

For too long we have treated water as an unlimited resource when in reality it is limited and very precious. We have been careless in how we use it. With climate change and population increase, there is more and more pressure on the water supply right across the world. We are privileged in this country to have clean, safe water but we will start to suffer from shortages if we don't start to use it much more carefully.

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We'd love to have some new members. Contact the Cold Ash Parish Greening Group chair, Richard Marshall: marshalr@btinternet.com