

Water: A Critical Resource

Water is among the most precious of natural resources, essential for the survival of life on Earth. As the global population has grown, demands on the finite supply of fresh water have increased dramatically. More than half of all available fresh water is now appropriated for use by the planet's 6.1 billion people. The additional amount that can be harnessed for the more than 9 billion people we will be in the future is limited.

Yet hundreds of millions of people already lack adequate access to the clean water they need for drinking, cooking, sanitation and agriculture. In addition, human development is diminishing wetlands, the critical ecosystem that helps to filter fresh water. Similarly, increased human use of water threatens wildlife and their habitats.

The world's women are disproportionately affected by insufficient access to clean water. Ensuring sufficient supplies of fresh water for current and future generations is among humanity's most critical challenges.

Water Supply and Demand

- Fresh water accounts for only 2.5 percent of Earth's surface.
- Global water use has increased sixfold in 70 years, as the world's population tripled.
- Humans now harness more than 50 percent of all available fresh water.
- To pace population growth, 70 percent of fresh water will have to be harnessed by 2025. If all the world's people consume water in 2025 at the rate now

enjoyed by residents of developed nations, 90 percent of all fresh water will be used in 2025.

- Two-thirds of all fresh water is used for agriculture, and irrigation is highly inefficient, with up to 60 percent lost to evaporation.¹
- To pace population growth, 70 percent of fresh water will have to be harnessed by 2025. If all the world's people consume water in 2025 at the rate now enjoyed by residents of developed nations, 90 percent of all fresh water will be used in 2025.
- As humans use more water, less remains to maintain vital river, lake and wetland ecosystems on which both people and wildlife depend.

Global Inequities in Water Use

- Fresh water is distributed unevenly, with nearly 500 million people suffering water stress or serious water scarcity. Under current trends, two-thirds of the world's population may be subject to moderate to high water stress in 2025.
- Two billion people get less than the 50 liters of water a day considered necessary to meet basic drinking, sanitation and cooking needs. In 2050, 4 billion people may be unable to meet the requirement.
- Vast regional disparities exist in per capita water use. In Africa, household water use averages 47 liters per person per day, while in Asia, the average is closer to 95 liters. In contrast, residents

of the United Kingdom average 334 liters per person per day. The United States leads the world at an estimated 578 liters per person per day.²

- Conflicts over fresh water, both political and violent, could erupt in coming decades as populations grow and more countries face water stress and outright scarcity.

Fresh Water is Not Always Clean Water

- Access to fresh water is no guarantee that it will be safe. At present, 1.1 billion people are consuming water that is not clean. In developing countries, 90 to 95 percent of all sewage and 70 percent of all industrial wastes are dumped untreated into surface waters. In developed countries, chemical runoff and acid rain pollute streams and force investment in billions of dollars for water treatment.
- More than two million people in developing countries die from causes linked to the drinking of unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and associated poor hygiene. Millions more suffer debilitation from water-borne diseases.³

Women and Water

Women, and often their children, suffer most from water shortage and poor quality.

- On average, women in the developing world walk six kilometers each day to collect water, carrying the equivalent of a suitcase.⁴
- When supplies become contaminated or scarce, women must spend more time and energy finding and collecting water they regard as safe for household use.
- One-third of women in Egypt walk more than an hour a day for water; in

other parts of Africa, the task consumes as much as eight hours.⁵

- Women are the primary caretakers for those who fall ill from water-related diseases, reducing their time available for education and productive economic efforts.

Water for the Future

Large-scale technological solutions to water scarcity, such as desalination, are unlikely to meet the growing need. The full participation of women at the household level is critical to the success of any water-resource management policy.

- Experts believe that low-cost technologies such as drip irrigation could double the efficiency of water use in agriculture. It is also imperative to bring clean, affordable water and sanitation to all the world's people.
- Some other essential changes include: restoring natural flow patterns to river systems, managing chemical use and animal wastes; curbing industrial air pollution; and instituting effective pricing policies.

UNFPA's Role

- In South Africa, UNFPA helped launch a project linking population, environmental and development objectives in order to provide clean water, create jobs and promote reproductive health.
- UNFPA supports a policy research project in India on the relationship between the growth and distribution of population and the availability of water, exploring links with women's quality of life and health.

—August 2002

Source: United Nations Population Fund, *The State of World Population 2001—Footprints and Milestones: Population and Environmental Change*, UNFPA, New York, 2001, except as noted below.

¹ United Nations, *Johannesburg Summit 2002 Fact Sheets, World Summit on Sustainable Development*, New York, 2002, p. 7 http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/media_info/factsheets.html

² National Wildlife Federation, *Population, Water & Wildlife: Finding a Balance*, Washington, DC, 2002, p. 11 <http://www.nwf.org/population/pdfs/pwwreport.pdf>

³ *Johannesburg Summit Fact Sheets*, p. 7

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Population, Water & Wildlife*, p. 12