



The Water We Need

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE that Seattle could ever face a water shortage. In my fourth December here, my husband and I bailed buckets of stormwater out of the basement of our 1940s rental house after rain overwhelmed our drains and gutters.

But about three-fourths of the water that flows through Washington state rivers in the spring and summer starts as snow, not rain, and gets stored in the Cascade and Olympic Mountains. The snow melts over a period of months, feeding creeks and rivers, and providing reliable supplies of drinking water, irrigation, and hydropower.

Mountain snow becomes less predictable as the climate warms, melting earlier in the year and leaving less to sustain our waterways in the dry season. In 2005, an unusually warm winter left March snowpacks at one-fourth their normal size. Rivers hit record lows, and our governor declared a drought emergency, which continued through a dry summer. You can't attribute any one event to climate change, but warming temperatures will make droughts like this more common in the Pacific Northwest and across the country.

Meanwhile, we're reaching the limits of many of our water supplies, and both wet and dry regions—from the desert Southwest to New England—are worried about water shortage. For decades, the United States has used big infrastructure—such as dams, drilling, and massive water transfers—to avoid the hard truth that water is finite. Experts like MacArthur Fellow Peter Gleick believe that the United States is heading toward “an era of water scarcity.”

We've also made our communities more vulnerable to global warming's impacts by overusing and degrading our water resources, through destruction of wetlands that buffer us against floods and consumption of water from aquifers faster than it can be renewed.

It's still possible to meet our water needs, even in the face of these converging crises. But it means we need to change our relationship with water.

We can start, as Sandra Postel writes, by “pay[ing] attention to how we value and use water” in our homes and communities. All over the country, communities and citizens are getting involved in water conservation—from repairing leaks to changing showerheads and using rain barrels.

We can take care of the ecosystems that supply our water needs. We can fight to keep pollution out of places like the Catskill-Delaware Watershed, which provides New York City's drinking water, or join groups like the Waterkeepers, which are stopping dam construction on Colorado rivers (page 36). A healthy watershed means more—and cleaner—water for people and wildlife, as a coalition of loggers and ranchers discovered when they began restoring wetlands in the Feather River Watershed in California (page 26).

We can keep water supplies in our collective, public care and out of corporate hands. Citizens in places like Felton, Calif., and Milwaukee are fighting attempts to privatize community water systems (page 38), and around the world, activists are stopping efforts to bottle, sell, and exploit drinking water for profit (page 33).

Throughout history, many cultures have developed traditions that protect water. In coming decades, our security and survival will depend on how well we learn to respect water's essential and irreplaceable role in all of life.

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