

2 Challenge Reading

World Water Crisis

To more than two billion people, fresh, pure water is more valuable than gold.

In many regions of the world, fresh water is being used faster than it can be replaced. West Asia faces the greatest threat. But the problem is not confined to the developing world. In the United States, 400 million cubic meters (520 million cubic yards) of groundwater is being removed from aquifers annually in Arizona—about double the amount being replaced by recharge from rainfall.

When access to water is within one kilometer (0.62 miles) of a dwelling, meaning it would take about 30 minutes a day to collect water, the average consumption is 20 liters (5 gallons) per day per person. In homes with multiple taps, the average daily consumption is 100 to 200 liters (roughly 25 to 50 gallons) per person. If the water source is farther than one kilometer, per-person consumption drops to around five liters (a little more than a gallon) per day, if that.

With so little water, basic hygiene is frequently compromised. This brings the added burden of illness to families already living in poverty. Infectious waterborne diseases are responsible for 80 percent of illnesses and deaths in the developing world. One child dies every eight seconds from a waterborne disease; 15 million children a year.

Women and female children who have to travel to collect water pay a high cost. Less time is available for caring for children, preparing food, or pursuing alternate economic activities. In some regions the women and girls must travel through unsafe areas and are vulnerable to attack. Families in many cases must forego sending their girls to school, perpetuating the grinding cycle of illiteracy and poverty.

Freshwater resources are [also] being squandered due to pollution. World Watch Institute estimates that every minute, 1.1 million liters (300,000 gallons) of raw sewage are dumped into the Ganges River, the primary source of water for many Indians. Only about 35 percent of the wastewater is treated in Asia, and about 14 percent is treated in Latin America. Only a negligible percentage of treatment has been reported in Africa. Even in industrialized countries, sewage is not universally treated. Fertilizer and pesticide residues from agricultural activities also contribute to contamination of fresh water resources.