

Water, Our Most Precious Resource. What We Have is All We Will Ever Have.

Will Rogers once remarked about land, "They ain't making any more of it". Well, he could have said the same thing about water, and been equally correct. The amount of water on the planet is fixed and has been for millions of years. Ninety-seven percent of all water is salt water, over 2 percent is locked up as ice, leaving less than 1 percent as fresh, liquid water.

Recently, a San Antonio TV weatherman exclaimed, after they had some good rains that raised the aquifer level a little, that "we might be able to get out of stage 1 water restrictions". The excitement in his voice was probably shared by many of his listeners, but it reveals an attitude that is inconsistent with the situation we are in. The idea that once restrictions are lifted, we can "use all the water we want", may be widely held, but it is simply not supported by the facts.

I grew up in the Permian Basin of West Texas, an area with annual rainfall of about 15 inches. As a kid, I watched native rangeland plowed under and planted in cotton, watered by large 6, or 8 inch pumps sucking water out of the huge Ogallala aquifer. Unlike the Edwards aquifer around here and which supplies San Antonio and some Hill Country wells with its water, the Ogallala is not being recharged in the Texas Panhandle. The water is almost gone, wells are drying up, and the future of agriculture in that part of the state is very much uncertain.

But there are still individuals and corporations using as much water as they can to make as much money as possible before all the wells are dry. It is legal for them to do so. But is it right?

Think of it this way. You are an astronaut on a trip to Mars with 5 others. Because of space and weight limitations, there are a limited number of food packets on board for all of you for the whole trip. You discover that one of your colleagues has been sneaking extra meals, depriving the rest of you of your fair share. How would you feel about that?

I have heard people say, about our future water situation, "Well, they will figure something out", thinking it is analogous to our future energy situation. But it is not the same thing. We continue to receive many times more energy from the sun every day than we can possibly use, so it is theoretically possible for new technologies to be developed to provide us with energy well into the future. But we don't, and won't, get any more water, the Earth has all it will ever have.

Yes, it is possible to desalinate salt water, making fresh water from sea water, but this process requires huge amounts of energy. More electric power plants create their own problems. Current power plants using coal, oil, natural gas or nuclear fuel require very large amounts of water. Can society absorb these costs? Certainly not for agricultural

use. People are already complaining about comparatively small increases in the price of water.

These are obviously extremely complicated issues which will be with us for the foreseeable future. I mention them here only to make the point that we should not assume that “They will figure something out”. We should instead take the attitude that our water supply is finite, that its replenishment is uncertain, and that using more than we each absolutely need is wrong. But of course, what one person considers an essential use, another may see as wasteful. It is going to take some time for us to sort out how to resolve these kinds of issues.

Most things that are in limited supply are apportioned out according to who can afford the price. Society thinks it is OK for those with more money to consume more, have more expensive cars, houses, clothes, etc. But water is essential to all life, biologically, and our society is structured on the principle that everyone is entitled to a certain amount of water. Should we ration water on the ability to pay? I hope not.

In the meantime, we all need to make water use such a part of our lives that we think about conservation whatever we do inside or outside of our homes. Water-efficient appliances inside, water-efficient landscapes and drip irrigation outside, and rainwater catchment should all be considered.

Until next time...

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