

## World Water Day—It Should Be Every Day

A few days ago I received an e-mail from The Nature Conservancy advising me that that day was officially World Water Day. At the time I had just been to a panel discussion on the subject of land fragmentation and our water future in Fredericksburg, and regrettably had to miss another meeting on water in Bandera. So the topic of water was pretty fresh in my mind when I received that e-mail, and I remember thinking (or maybe even saying it out loud) that “Every day should be World Water Day”.

The frequency of these water-related meetings and the urgency expressed by most speakers, panelists and participants has certainly intensified in the past three or so years. Nothing focuses the mind better than the threat of losing something that is essential to our way of life, and of all the things in that category, water certainly has to be at the top of the list.

Let me try to paraphrase some of the sentiments expressed at the recent meeting I attended. First, although the large room was packed with a very attentive audience, there is the concern that neither the average citizen, nor our civic or governmental leaders, seem to grasp the seriousness of the situation.

In the last few years many cities have instituted water restrictions because of declining supplies, people have had wells go dry, springs and seeps have either slowed down or dried up entirely, many aquifer levels are low and the river flows are very low. San Antonio is beginning work on a very expensive desalination plant and is also casting their eye around the region for places where they can get access to local aquifers to pump water to the city.

All of this should have alerted everyone to the fact that we are on the verge of running out of water. And yet, the projections are that our population is expected to double in the next three decades! Where are the new residents going to get water? Should we be encouraging so much future “development” in this semi-arid region?

Those of us that study these things know that how efficiently the land captures rainfall and feeds springs and creeks and aquifers depends on how the land is managed, and that in general, when larger parcels of land are broken up into smaller ranchettes, this water capture efficiency is reduced.

So as more and more people move into the area and more ranches are broken up into smaller and smaller home sites, the efficiency of water capture will decline just as there are more people demanding water. Doesn’t this predict major problems for all of us and shouldn’t we be looking into finding solutions now?

Another sentiment expressed during the meeting, and one which was greeted by sustained applause, was the feeling that by far the biggest non-essential use of water was for landscapes. Data show that as much as 60 percent of household use of water (for at least six months a year) is for landscapes, primarily non-native grass lawns. It is easy to see why some folks that maintain a native plant landscape and capture rainwater might resent others who maintain a large green St Augustine lawn, plus ligustrum, Chinaberry trees and Japanese honeysuckle.

As someone who loves plants and works hard to maintain a native habitat, I certainly understand anyone for whom their landscape is very important to them and something they want to protect. My answer for them is very simple, Natives, Natives, Natives.

Native plants evolved here with our droughts and without anyone watering or fertilizing them or spraying insecticides, etc., so they can survive without excessive artificial watering. And if we all planted natives, we would be reducing the amount of water we as a community are using. Water we don't take out of our aquifers now can always be used later, and it will be the cheapest water we will ever have.

Most of us didn't quit smoking when we first heard it was bad for us, and most of us didn't use our seat belts in our first car that had them either. But most of us eventually learned and are the better for it. We can learn to live without large expanses of non-native water-hungry plants. Happy (belated) World Water Day!

Until next time...

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