

Beyond Thirst: The Global Water Crisis
Kathiann M. Kowalski

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Beyond Thirst: The Global Water Crisis

by Kathiann M. Kowalski

1 Most of us think nothing about grabbing a cold glass of water. In 2008, though,
2 flooding caused a drinking water shortage in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Meanwhile, North
3 Carolina, Georgia, and California suffered serious droughts. Yet these problems seem
4 small compared to the world's water crisis.

5 Every day, 1.2 billion people don't get enough safe drinking water for their basic needs.
6 That's nearly one-sixth of the world's people. More than a third—roughly 2.6 billion
7 people—lack safe sanitation. Left unchecked, the crisis will only worsen.

8 A Scarce Resource

9 While water covers 70 percent of Earth's surface, 97 percent is undrinkable seawater.
10 With two-thirds of all fresh water locked in polar ice caps, only 1 percent of the world's
11 water is potentially available for people.

12 "Water is a precious, vital resource," stresses Meena Palaniappan at the Pacific
13 Institute in California. When poor sanitation and other practices pollute water, less is
14 available for basic needs.

15 "Climate change is going to have a dramatic impact on water resources," adds
16 Palaniappan. For many areas, rainfall will occur in a shorter period of time.
17 Meanwhile, drought periods will lengthen. Population growth will further stress water
18 resources.

19 The World Health Organization (WHO) says each person needs at least 20 liters (a
20 little more than 5 gallons) per day. But not everyone has equal access, especially in
21 developing countries. When well-to-do people have water pumped into their homes,
22 they get water at low per-unit costs. However, poor people in the same cities may pay
23 up to 10 times as much per liter for water from tank trucks. Rural people may have to
24 fetch water themselves. "It's a huge inequity," says Palaniappan.

25 Disease, Poverty, and Other Problems

26 Lack of safe water and sanitation is deadly. Contaminated water kills 1.8 million
27 children every year with diarrhea. Parasites, bacteria, and viruses cause many other

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28 illnesses. At any moment, nearly half the people in developing countries suffer from
29 some water-related sickness.

30 “These people have no choice,” notes Sally Edwards at the Pan American
31 Health Organization/World Health Organization. “They know it leads to disease,
32 but there is no other water.”

33 Girls and women suffer most. “Many girls who would otherwise be in school are
34 spending hours each day walking to distant sources to collect water,” notes Nicole
35 Wickenhauser at WaterPartners International in Missouri.

36 Girls who do attend school often drop out as teens if schools lack separate toilets.
37 Outside school, girls and women may risk attack just by going to the bathroom.

38 Adults can’t earn as much when they spend hours fetching water of questionable
39 quality. Water-related sickness makes them miss more work. As a result, families
40 can’t escape a cycle of disease and poverty.

41 Water shortages affect food supplies, too. According to WHO, growing one day’s
42 food for a family of four can take as much water as an Olympic-size swimming pool.
43 Insecurity about water can also cause political and economic conflicts—both within
44 countries and internationally.

45 In short, addressing the water crisis won’t just improve health. It will let people build
46 better, more secure lives.

47 **Addressing the Crisis**

48 In 2000, the United Nations announced a Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of
49 halving the proportion of people without safe drinking water by 2015. While we are
50 still far from that goal, progress is occurring.

51 “The technology exists to provide water and sanitation to all,” stresses Edwards.
52 The most successful water and sanitation projects involve communities in decision-
53 making. They also teach people about hygiene and system upkeep, so safe water
54 supplies are sustainable.

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55 Technologies vary based on geography, but they don't need to be elaborate.
56 One area might use a rainwater harvesting system. Another community might
57 benefit from a deep borehole well.

58 "All of our projects use as simple a technology as possible, and we use local
59 materials," says Wickenhauser. "It's easier to operate and maintain."

60 Solving the global water crisis will cost billions of dollars. Yet WHO says meeting its
61 MDG for safe water would cost less than five days' worth of global military spending.
62 On a smaller scale, WaterPartners International says \$25 can bring safe water to
63 someone for life. Just \$150 can meet a whole family's water needs.

64 **What Can You Do?**

65 Start by saving water at home and elsewhere. Ask others to protect this precious
66 resource, too. Recent water shortages in the United States show that we shouldn't
67 waste water. Conservation can also help the environment.

68 Beyond this, spread the word about the world's water crisis. Some schools have fund-
69 raisers to educate people and raise money for water projects. Speak out to elected
70 officials, too. Tell them you want the world to have safe drinking water and sanitation
71 for everyone.

72 "We know how to bring people safe water," stresses Wickenhauser. "It's a problem we
73 can solve together."

74 Clean water is vital to healthy living, and supplying all the world's people with it is a
75 challenge that must be solved. In many places, getting clean water is hard work.

76 Got trash? It is important to dispose of garbage properly so it doesn't end up in our
77 waterways.

78 Water is scarce in many parts of the world, but even where it isn't, it should never be
79 wasted.

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