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Water Worries

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Water Worries

By Sara Aase

- *At home and around the globe, **water** is a precious resource.*

Next time you turn on the faucet, picture this: Halfway around the world, a girl your age is walking 4 miles to fetch 5 gallons of **water**, which weighs roughly 42 pounds. She may have to wait hours in line for her turn, and if it's the dry season, the well may be little more than a muddy puddle. It will be the only **water** her family can use that day for drinking, cooking, and bathing, even if it makes them sick.

Obi O., a seventh grader at Highview Middle School in New Brighton, Minn., sees that reality up close when he visits his relatives in the village of Odidama, Nigeria. "When I'm there, we walk a few miles to the stream and back to get **water**," he says. "When we get back, we have to boil the **water** before we can use it. It's a struggle."

At home in Minnesota, though, Obi just turns on the tap. He didn't see how he could help 1 billion people around the world get the same easy access to clean **water**, until he met his teacher, Patty Hall. Three years ago, Hall and her students made plans to raise \$7,000 that would be used to build a dam in Kenya. The dam would give the Kenyans access to clean drinking **water**. The Minnesota students raised more than \$13,000. They were so happy to see they were helping other kids that they decided to keep going.

Now more than 100 schools around the country participate in H2O For Life (www.h2oforliveschools.org), a nonprofit organization started by Hall and her students. This year Obi's class plans to raise at least \$8,000 to help build a well and toilets for 800 students of the Kilfo K-8 school in Oromiya, Ethiopia. "I feel my ancestors would be proud of me for doing this to try to change people's lives," Obi says.

Water for Life

We draw **water** from lakes, streams, rivers, rainwater, and underground reservoirs, but freshwater represents a small part of Earth's **water** resources. **Water** supplies are replenished by rain and purified naturally by swamps, marshes, and other wetlands. But population growth, farming, and expanding cities worldwide have strained that natural system. A person needs between 5.3 and 13.2 gallons of **water** a day for drinking, cooking, and bathing. But most of us in the United States use that amount--or more--just taking a five-minute shower.

Water tops the list of priorities for world leaders because population growth and climate changes are likely to make getting **water** even harder. "Drought is still a minor nuisance for most of us," says Georges C. Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association, whose annual meeting this fall will focus on **water**. "But it's a big deal when you're in a nation where you can't **water**

your crops and you have famine. **Water** may be the next environmental resource we'll be fighting over."

[\(See picture, "Pie Chart: U.S. Water Use."\)](#)

Scarce Resource

People living in desert areas naturally have fewer sources of **water**. But the biggest problem in many places is that people don't have enough clean **water** to drink. If wastewater isn't disposed of properly, it can mix with clean **water**. That *contamination* makes the drinking **water** unsafe. In the poorest countries, 1 billion people can't get clean drinking **water**. If nothing is done, that number will jump to 5 billion within 17 years, says the United Nations.

Conflicts can happen when **water** is scarce, or hard to find. From 2004 to 2006, at least 250 people were killed in fights between Somalia and Ethiopia over **water** wells. In the U.S., some fast-growing cities are stretching **water** resources. Las Vegas, for example, uses all of its portion of the Colorado River, a resource shared between seven states and Mexico. Now the city is applying for the right to use **water** from other sources in northern Nevada and Utah. That's making people there nervous. "Farmers and ranchers in those areas are concerned that the amount [Las Vegas] is proposing to take is just not there," says Heather Cooley, senior research associate with the Pacific Institute, an organization based in Oakland, Calif., that studies **water**.

Drought and population growth are straining **water** resources elsewhere too, says Cooley. In the southeastern United States, a severe drought and fast growth in and around Atlanta have led to **water** disputes. Meanwhile, farther north, South Carolina has sued to stop its upstream neighbor, North Carolina, from pumping millions of gallons a day from the Catawba River.

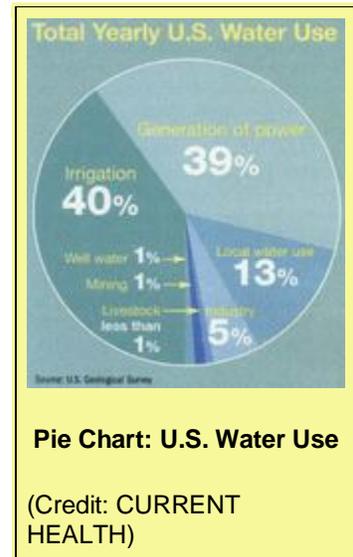
Climate Change Heats Up Crisis

Global warming will make the strain on the global **water** supply worse. Climate change already affects **water** resources and precipitation patterns, says Stephen Schneider, professor of biological sciences at Stanford University in California. It will completely change lifestyles by the end of the century if it remains unchanged. "We're 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than we were a century ago, and that change is associated with more intense hurricanes and extreme precipitation," he says. That means dry areas will have more droughts, while other areas will most likely see more flooding.

What You Can Do

If you don't live in an area experiencing drought or **water** shortages, why should you care? Well, cutting **water** use helps everyone on the planet because it keeps more **water** in the environment and saves the energy used to process **water**, Cooley says. Take a look at how much **water** you and your family use, she suggests.

- Keep an eye on how long you run the **water**. "I used to take 20-minute showers," says seventh grader Samantha H. of Arden Hills, Minn. Samantha is in Hall's class. "I've cut those at least in half to not use so much **water** that I don't really need."
- Ask your family to consider installing **water**-saving showerheads, faucets, toilets, and appliances. If your household pays for each gallon of **water** it uses, you also can save money in the long run.
- Find out how much **water** you use outside for watering a lawn or garden. That's where we rack up the most gallons, Cooley says. Plants that are native to your area are often natural **water**-conservers. They can provide a good alternative to grass.



"Our class project has really opened my eyes to the realities around the world," says Samantha. She predicts you'll start seeing ways to make a difference everywhere you go--and that helping will make a big difference in your life too. "It's easy to think and act globally," she notes. "Whenever I think about this **water** project, it makes me smile."

Tapped Out

These everyday activities can use a lot of **water**. But you can use less by turning on the tap only when you need it. Here's the amount you save each time:

Washing dishes.....**25 gallons**
Brushing teth.....**4.5 gallons**
Washing hands/face....**1 gallon**

How much water do you use everyday? Visit this link and type in the number of times you shower, brush your teeth, or wash clothes, and get an instant answer.ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/sq3.html

Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Before Reading

- Ask students whether their households take any **water**-saving measures. If so, what do they do?

Discuss

- How does a lack of clean drinking **water** affect people around the globe? (*can't **water** their crops, have problems finding enough **water** to drink and use for cooking and bathing, fighting over what **water** there is, cities and states may go to court over **water** issues*)
- What is one surprising fact you learned from reading this story?

Resources

- H2O For Life School to School: www.h2oforliveschools.org
- Running Dry documentary: www.runningdry.org/world.html
- National Integrated Drought Information System: www.drought.gov/portal/server.pt

Do a Water Audit

Directions: Read the article "**Water** Worries". Then fill out the chart to find ways you and your household can save **water**. Skip any appliances or taps your home doesn't have.

(See picture, "Chart: **Water Audit.**")

1. Name one appliance or **water** tap you noted above that can be used less often or for a shorter amount of time.
2. What can be done to help this appliance or tap use less **water**?
3. Think about your school. Are there any places at school where you think **water** could be saved?

Answer Key

Answers will vary.

Appliance, Tap, Refrigerator or Dishwasher, Toilet	Number of times used daily	Number of minutes the water is running each time	Can we save water?
Toilet			
Dishwasher			
Refrigerator			
Outdoor sprinkler			

Chart: Water Audit

(Credit: CURRENT HEALTH)