WWF

Living Waters
Conserving the source of life

The Facts On
Water in Africa

Africa appears blessed with abundant water resources: large rivers include the Congo, Nile, Zambezi and Niger and Lake Victoria is the world's second largest.

But Africa is the second driest continent in the world, after Australia, and millions of Africans still suffer from water shortages throughout the year. Shortages are often due to problems of uneven distribution - sometimes there is much water where there are fewer people - and also to management of existing supplies that could be improved. One example of the disparity in water availability lies in the Congo basin where 30 per cent of the continent's water drains land inhabited by only 10 per cent of Africa's population.

Water scarcity

Fourteen countries in Africa are already experiencing water stress; another 11 countries are expected to join them by 2025 at which time nearly 50 per cent of Africa's predicted population of 1.45 billion people will face water stress or scarcity. Nearly 51 per cent (300 million people) in sub-Saharan countries lack access to a supply of safe water and 41 per cent lack adequate sanitation.

John Newby/Living Deserts

More than 80 of Africa's river and lake basins are shared by two or more countries and many countries depend on water flowing from outside their national boundaries. Some large-scale water infrastructure projects including dams may exacerbate the impacts of flooding and drought, threatening people's livelihood and further reducing their access to water.

In South Africa, the "Working for Water" Programme and new water laws are demonstrating how water scarcity can be alleviated by managing nature better. The Programme employs many previously disadvantaged South Africans to remove water-consuming exotic plans and so increasing water flow into rivers. This will provide water for people and nature without building new dams.

Water and food

Over 2,600 freshwater fish species are known from Africa and fish constitutes 21 per cent of animal protein intake, a figure second only to the Far East. In 1994, the total freshwater catch in sub-Saharan Africa was 1.6 million tonnes - 40 per cent of the total fisheries for the region.

Most of the water diverted for human use in Africa is used for irrigated agriculture. All too often these agricultural developments have been planned improperly and have not achieved their forecast benefits for the poor. Such schemes have also reduced food supplies from traditional sources such as river fisheries and supplies harvested through traditional practices such as planting crops when flood waters have receded from floodplains.
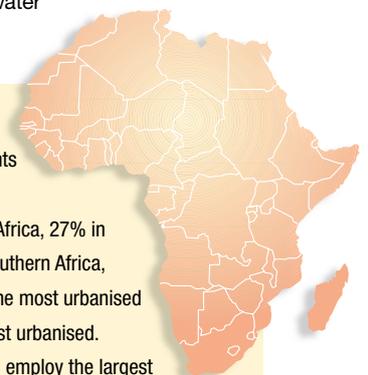
Water and health

Almost half of the population (778 million in 1997) suffers from one of the six major water-related diseases. Lack of risk preparedness and mitigation is also a factor: in Mozambique over 1 million people were displaced by the floods of 1999/2000 and an unknown number killed. Every day, 650 people die from diarrhoea in Africa, mainly children under five years of age. More than 10,000 people contracted cholera during outbreaks in South Africa in 2001.

Water sanitation

During the last ten years, provision of sanitation in rural Africa has decreased by 2 per cent, and the low levels of urban water supply and sanitation have hardly improved. Arid and semi-arid areas, especially in Sudano-Sahelian Africa and North Africa, are likely to be most affected by increased water stress. Underlying many of these problems is the fact that water is a finite resource, and there are increasing demands and pressure due to competing uses of water for agricultural and industrial production.

- Africa is home to about 13% (800 million people) of the world population and accounts for about 2% of world economic output.
- About 29% of the population lives in West Africa, 27% in East Africa, 18% in North Africa, 17% in Southern Africa, and 10% in Central Africa. North Africa is the most urbanised region in Africa, while East Africa is the least urbanised.
- Overall, the agricultural and mining sectors employ the largest numbers of Africans. Around two-thirds of Southern Africa's population is dependent on agriculture for employment.
- Vast desert and densely forested regions are nearly uninhabited, while population density is very high in places like Nigeria, the Nile River valley, and the Great Lakes region. Two of the largest cities in the world – Cairo and Lagos – are in Africa.
- Estimates of the number of languages range from 700 to 3,000. Major languages, in terms of the number of speakers, include Afrikaans, Akan, Amharic, Arabic, English, French, Fufulde, Hausa, Igbo, Malagasy, Oromo, Portuguese, Rwanda, Shona, Somali, Sotho, Swahili, Xhosa, Yoruba and Zulu.

Source: US Department of Energy   http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/africa.html

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Water and mountain sources

Mountains are often called nature's "water towers". Because of their size and shape, they force air upwards, making it condense as clouds which give us rain and snow that supply our water in rivers. The Rift Valley of Eastern Africa includes Kilimanjaro at nearly 6000m and runs north to south for nearly 4000km. Guinea, with the Fouta Djallon and Nimba Mountains, boasts 1165 waterways and streams totalling 6500 kilometres flowing among 23 basins, 12 of which cross national borders. By virtue of their rarity - compared to other regions - the mountain and upland areas in Africa are of great importance to river basin supply.

Deforestation and overgrazing can greatly reduce the reliability of water supplied by mountain wetlands. Such wetlands are important for maintaining water tables and recharging groundwater that fills wells, runs in taps, or can be collected from streams for a number of basic daily uses. Already, the world's water table is dropping fast, anywhere from one to thirty metres, sometimes more. In some places and in certain seasons, a drop of one metre can greatly affect people's access to safe, adequate water.

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Water and wildlife

Vast floodplains along the Niger River and the river itself are home to threatened species such as the West African manatee, hippopotamus, crocodile and black-crowned crane. The Niger contains 243 fish species in 36 families, of which 20 species are found nowhere else.

Lake Malawi, called Lake Niassa in Mozambique and Nyasa in Tanzania, hosts the richest freshwater fish fauna in the world, accommodating about 14 per cent of the world's freshwater fish species, 99 per cent of which are found only in this lake. The lake also supports some 188 species of mammals, 140 species of reptiles, and 90 species of amphibians.

Facts for Change

Improving access and sanitation are only a partial solution. Taps and pipes are mere delivery mechanisms; water, the resource, is only available in clean supply through care for the wetlands and rivers where it flows.

Achieving effective water management in Africa requires representative participation by all who stand to gain or suffer, and consideration of water timing, quality and biodiversity. First steps include:

WWF-Living Waters Programme/Denis Landenbergue

- Establish multilateral river basin management authorities for more than 50 per cent of 80 transboundary rivers and lakes in Africa by 2010.
- Establish national plans for the management and wise use of wetlands and conserve 50 million hectares of freshwater wetlands to sustain the livelihoods of local peoples by 2010.

WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by:
– conserving the world's biological diversity
– ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable
– promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

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