

Water – Two billion people are dying for it

Water – Two billion people are dying for it is the World Environment Day (WED) theme selected for 2003 by the United Nations. WED occurs on the 5th of June each year and was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1972 to mark the opening of the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment.

This particular water-related theme has been chosen to support the United Nations' International Year of Freshwater, 2003, and World Water Day (WWD), which occurred on the 22nd of March. Previously, in 2002, the Covenant on Economic and Cultural Rights (CESCR), for the first time recognised water explicitly as a fundamental human right. The 145 countries, which have ratified the International CESCR, will now be compelled to progressively ensure that everyone has access to safe and secure drinking water, equitably without discrimination. Furthermore, the World Summit on Sustainable Development last year in Johannesburg, recognised the centrality of freshwater to human development, and committed to a precise and time-bound agenda for addressing the world's current and future water resource and sanitation problems.

So why this sudden attention to freshwater? Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations recently noted that if current trends continue, two out of every three people on earth will suffer moderate to severe water shortages in little more than two decades from now. Global water consumption has risen almost tenfold since 1900, and many parts of the world are now reaching the limits of their supply. Currently, A fifth of the world's population is without access to safe water supplies. Six thousand people, mainly children in developing countries, die every day as a result of dirty, contaminated water. Approximately 70% of all fresh water withdrawn for human use is used for irrigation. Half of the world's wetlands have been lost, with most of the destruction taking place over the past 50 years.

For reasons of drought, water quality and salinity, amongst others, Australia has had its own water crises in the past few decades. Water restrictions have become commonplace. State elections have been held in the balance as a consequence of water-related concerns. Water rights and dry land salinity represent some of the most pressing socio-economic/environmental concerns facing Australia. Australians use about 1million litres of freshwater per person each year, one of the highest rates of per capita consumption. As engineers we not only have the duty to consider water sensitive issues in development, industry and in new technology, but also need to engage with other key stakeholders in the water debate to ensure that intergenerational equity in water rights is established. We should also embrace the notion that, as Kofi Annan eloquently notes in his WWD address, whether we live upstream or downstream, in cities or in rural areas, water issues -- the global water cycle itself -- should link us in a common effort to protect and share it equitably, sustainably and peacefully.

Previously published in an edited format in Engineers Australia – May 2003

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