



Canada's water ranks second best in world

Behind Finland: UN says shortages will increase over next decade

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National Post
Wednesday, March 05, 2003

Canada has the second-highest water quality in the world, according to a United Nations analysis of the world's water supply that also played down fears of wars being fought over declining water supplies.

More countries will face water shortages over the next century, the UN predicts, but its historical analysis suggests water conflicts are usually settled through diplomacy. The threat of water wars, especially in the Middle East where supply is low, has been rising recently on the international agenda.

In the water-quality rankings, which evaluate both purity and availability, Canada came second to Finland. Last out of 122 countries was Belgium, where runoffs from agricultural waste and other pollution contributed to its dismal score of -2.25, nearly a full point behind second-last Morocco.

The report is to be presented today in Tokyo, and comes one year after UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan warned national rivalries over water could harbour "the seeds of violent conflict."

Regarding conflict over water, Ralph Daley, director of the United Nations University International Network on Water, Environment and Health, in Hamilton, Ont., said water is regarded as so fundamental to life that nations will avoid subjecting it to the uncertainty of war. The UN's analysis of 500 years of political conflict bears this interpretation out, he said.

"Historically, even in situations where countries have been in conflict over other issues, water has been a factor for peace," he said, noting this sets water apart from other natural resources such as oil.

For example, the UN report says in the last 50 years, 37 violent cross-border disputes have been fought, while 200 water-sharing treaties have been signed. It singles out the Nile Basin Initiative in Africa as an "extremely promising" one.

"I think it's obvious that if things get severe enough, that the historical pattern we've seen may not continue into the future," said Dr. Daley, who contributed to the UN report. But he stressed that, because water is such a fundamental need, conflict is likely to be on a more personal scale than open war and may show itself first in riots or fighting between farmers.

Other critics of the water war predictions have argued there are few, if any, places in the world where a country at a disadvantage in water supply is in a position to attack a neighbour that controls significant water resources.

War aside, though, the predictions are dire. The UN report suggests that, worldwide, available water will decline by one-third in the next 20 years, with profound effects on global health, since 80% of all sickness in the developing world is water-related. The report estimates 20% of the decline will be due to global warming.

The report says that, in 2000, 1.1 billion people had no access to clean water, and estimates this will soon rise to more than four billion.

A key recommendation of the report is that, rather than trying to transport water to dry countries, the developed world should focus its energies on delivering agricultural products. Seventy per cent of all water use is for agriculture, the report says.

"Transport of water by ship is simply too expensive and cannot be undertaken on a large enough scale to truly have an impact in countries that have very poor water supplies," Dr. Daley said. "If we could build an international regime which switched to essentially food security, as opposed to food self-sufficiency, then agricultural products that Canadian water helps us produce can be transported around the world instead of the water itself. That's a lot more practical and it addresses poverty more directly."

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