

Monday
Magazine

It Costs the Earth

Earth Day
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If you suddenly had to pay two bucks for every litre of water you drew from the tap, what would you do? Would you shrug and pay up, figuring that cheap water was nice while it lasted, but hey, everything comes with a price? Would you protest against the evil government that came up with the scheme? Or would you cheer, because it's about time we were forced to stop taking water for granted, and hey, who needs a shower everyday anyhow?

Don't worry, it's not in the works, at least not at the moment. This "demand side management," as you might guess, isn't exactly a popular idea right now. Here in Canada, a country that has plenty of fresh, clean and wonderfully abundant water, we're not especially inclined to want to pay for what comes falling from the sky for free. And yet, if we don't start looking at how we treat that water, we could face shortages in the future—ones that will make two bucks a litre sound like a deal.

When a recent report speculated that the lower mainland and Southern B.C. could face a water shortage in the future (due to a complicated and theoretical series of events involving icebergs melting and climate change), I started to wonder what the world would eventually be like. And since we were in the midst of preparing this week's feature section, devoted to the environment (starting on page 7), I wanted to find out just how much of a difference that water shortage would make. My guess was that it'd be huge, and I guessed right.

→ According to Tony Maas, a research associate with the POLIS project at the University of Victoria, we're mighty big water users here in Canada. The project's urban water management component has been (among other things) measuring the use of water in 20 urban areas across Canada, and has found that on average, each Canadian uses 343 litres of water per day. The biggest users studied were in St. John's, where each person uses 600 litres of water a day, and the least were in Charlottetown, where they seem to get by with just under 200 litres each per day. Price that at \$2 per litre, and suddenly it costs Canadians, on average, \$686 *per day* to bathe, drink, flush toilets, cook and wash. You can see how an idea like demand-side management isn't going to fly very far, very fast.

But wait a moment. We'll pay \$2 for a litre of fancy water in a plastic bottle, won't we? I admit, I did it just last week, when I was at a gas station and desperately thirsty. Well, I probably shouldn't have been driving anywhere anyway, and buying a plastic bottle of water just added to the environmental carnage I was committing, because not only did the plastic have to be produced, but after I was done with it, it would have to be disposed of (or at least recycled—see page 8 for more about that). Nice going. So much for *my* dainty environmental footprint. But nooo, I wasn't the only thirsty vehicle user at the gas station that day, and I didn't notice anyone else looking terribly concerned at the consequences of their actions.

But that's the problem. It probably doesn't matter if one person uses 343 litres of water in a day—there's lots of water available, remember? However, that's *every day*. It's going to have an impact at some point. And I'm afraid that it's looking more and more like that "some point" may be closer than we think. By our use of fossil fuels, plastics, chemicals and pesticides, not to mention our overuse of water and other resources, we're creating an environmental crisis, and I'm not sure we quite realize how serious it is. As federal Green Party leader Jim Harris puts it, you can forgive the economic deficit, but nobody can ever forgive the environmental one. And that's disturbing, to say the least.

But as long as we live in a country with an abundance of good, drinkable water, and still keep driving to stores to purchase water in plastic bottles, we're contributing to that deficit. Who are we to whine when we're told to restrict our lawn watering to odd days? Who are we to whine, when it's estimated that one-fifth of the world's population doesn't have access to *any* clean water? And who are we to whine at the idea of water for \$2 a litre? It's a bargain at any price. **M**