

Will The Next War Be Fought Over Water?

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Just as wars over oil played a major role in 20th-century history, a new book makes a convincing case that many 21st-century conflicts will be fought over water.

In *Water: The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power and Civilization*, journalist Steven Solomon argues that water is surpassing oil as the world's scarcest critical resource.

Only 2.5 percent of the planet's water supply is fresh, Solomon writes, much of which is locked away in glaciers. World water use in the past century grew twice as fast as world population.

"We've now reached the limit where that trajectory can no longer continue," Solomon tells NPR's Mary Louise Kelly. "Suddenly we're going to have to find a way to use the existing water resources in a far, far more productive manner than we ever did before, because there's simply not enough."

One issue, Solomon says, is that water's cost doesn't reflect its true economic value. While a society's transition from oil may be painful, water is irreplaceable. Yet water costs far less per gallo---- and even less than that for some.

"In some cases, where there are large political subsidies, largely in agriculture, it does not [cost very much]," Solomon says. "In many cases, irrigated agriculture is getting its water for free. And we in the cities are paying a lot, and industries are also paying an awful lot. That's unfair. It's inefficient to the allocation of water to the most productive economic ends."

At the same time, Solomon says, there's an increasing feeling in the world that everyone has a basic right to a minimum 13 gallons of water a day for basic human health. He doesn't necessarily have an issue with that.

"I think there's plenty of water in the world, even in the poorest and most water-famished country, for that 13 gallons to be given for free to individuals — and let them pay beyond that," he says.

Solomon says the world is divided into water haves and have-nots. China, Egypt and Pakistan are just a few countries facing critical water issues in the 21st century.

In his book he writes, "Consider what will happen in water-distressed, nuclear-armed, terrorist-besieged, overpopulated, heavily irrigation dependent and already politically unstable Pakistan when its single water lifeline, the Indus river, loses a third of its flow from the disappearance from its glacial water source."

Solomon notes some good water news, too. The United States has made significant progress in curbing its water use, thanks to market forces and legislation such as the Clean Water Act.

"Our water use between 1900 and 1975 actually tripled relative to population growth," he says. "Since 1975 to the present day, it has flat-lined. And we still had a population increase of about 30 percent and our GDP continued to grow. So it's an amazing increase in water productivity."

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