

Canadians waste water, UVic study shows

Bill Cleverley

Times Colonist, Victoria BC

Sunday, August 24, 2003

Canadians have to stop taking water supplies for granted, says UVic researchers in a POLIS Project report on ecological governance.

Urban Canadians are some of the most wasteful water users on the planet, says Oliver Brandes, author of *Flushing Our Future? Examining Water Use in Canada*. The first in a series of three reports, it compares delivery and water-use patterns in 20 Canadian cities.

Of the cities surveyed, Charlottetown used the least amount of water residentially at 156 litres per capita per day while St. John's, at 659 litres used the most. Victoria and Vancouver, using 340 and 357 litres per capita respectively, were close to the national average.

On average, Canadians use 343 litres of fresh water per person, per day—a rate that is on the increase yet is already second only to the United States and more than double the amount used by most Europeans.

Vast quantities of treated water are wasted daily through watering lawns and flushing toilets, the report says.

Simply put, Brandes says, "We have a problem. We use too much water. There are alternatives and we better start addressing it now."

Water supplies cannot be constantly enlarged, Brandes said. Governments and the general population have to seriously look at conservation, reuse and recycling of water.

"These are issues that are real. We can't just complain if somebody tells us we can't water on Wednesdays or that we're going to drill a well as they did commonly in Oak Bay in response to watering restrictions. You can't just have a green lawn. It's a hedonistic use."

He said current low-priced water will only lead to an over-taxed supply system.

The report says inefficient use results in costly and over-extended regional infrastructure and significant ecological impacts related to diversion, storage and withdrawal of water as well as the return of used water to lakes and rivers and wetlands.

Contrary to the common perception that Canada has an abundance of water, more than 25 per cent of municipalities with water systems reported seasonal shortages between 1994 and 1999.

Managing demand can happen through a variety of ways but usually entails a mix of education, pricing, regulation and recycling, the report says.

"This is an issue that needs to be on the radar screen so that we start dealing with the issue as opposed to a usual Canadian response of crisis, reaction and then scramble... What I'd like to see is a more unified approach at the higher levels of government and the municipalities working in more of an effective way where the demand side of the equation is brought up to at least equal (to the supply).

"Why don't we look at that first and then only in situations where we cannot deal with the problems through efficiency and changing behaviour, then maybe we contemplate raising a reservoir or digging another aquifer?" Brandes said.

POLIS was launched in 2001 at UVic as a project focussed on ecological governance.