Guest post: Five things hippies get wrong about water

Dan Crawford | July 16, 2014 7:18 am

US/Global Economics

Dan here….I find David interesting and flexible in his approaches to the particular contexts of ownership and uses of water. It is often an intensely local set of circumstances.

Guest post by David Zetland Blogging on the political economy of water at aguanomics Author of Living with Water Scarcity (2014) and The End of Abundance (2011)

Five things hippies get wrong about water

Hi everyone. I’m a water economist, born and raised in San Francisco. I’m here to clarify a few misconceptions, help you understand how we get water issues wrong, and suggest how better policies serve social and private interests. Feel free to ask questions. — David*

“Bottled water is bad”

This statement is often followed by observations on lax regulations on the quality of water in bottles, the need to fund public water systems, the oil and energy consumption from making and moving bottles, and some hostile words towards Nestle, Coca Cola and Pepsico — the three biggest sellers of bottled water.

All of these statements contain some truth, but they miss other dominant factors. A worry about quality is really a worry about the government’s failure to regulate safety. The second complaint can be solved by ensuring that charges for public water are adequate to cover costs — another responsibility of the government. The last two complaints ignore the fact that bottled water — like the iPhone and organic milk — is just another consumer product. There’s no point, therefore, in attacking its consumption or the companies selling it unless you’re also going to condemn consumption and capitalism in general. That’s fine, but bottled water may not be the best target.

It would be better to ensure that ALL drinking water is safe, tap water systems are funded, and plastic bottles are returnable for a deposit. Anti-consumption actions would be more productive if they were aimed at products with heavier footprints. How about closing a few downtown blocks to cars so public spaces are for people?

“Farmers waste water on low value crops”
We all eat food, but less than 3 percent of workers in developed countries grow food.

I’m no exception, but I’ve talked to farmers to get their side of this view. The first thing they mention is that it’s often profitable to “waste” water on some crop (alfalfa, for example) than grow another crop that needs more labor, chemicals or machinery. A more interesting problem may arise when farmers are “stuck in a rut” of growing crops that no longer make sense from an environmental or financial perspective, or who are forced to use water if they do not want to lose their rights to do so in the future.

For an alternative view, I’d suggest talking to the guys at farmer’s markets, but they are not the mega-producers of monocrops whose behavior is often encouraged (and sometimes driven) by government regulations on what crops can be grown where or how water must be used. Subsidies to corn production in the US, for example, result in heavy groundwater pumping and surface water contamination (google “Gulf of Mexico dead zone”), but farmers are reluctant switch to garden crops (fruit and vegetables) because they need the cash flow from corn sales to repay their debt on (corn-specific) machines and expensive land.

Activists who want vibrant farming communities and healthy food systems should lobby against subsidies that go to large farmers and monocrops in the US and EU. There’s serious doubt whether they lower the price of food, but there’s no doubt that they harm small and medium farms that must compete with vast agribusinesses.

“If they privatize the water system, then we’ll pay more for worse service”

This objection is over-simplified on two levels. First is the fact that ALL water systems are regulated because they are monopolies. “Public” systems run by municipalities are regulated by politicians or bureaucrats. Investor-owned utilities (“private” systems) are regulated by state-appointed utility commissioners who usually oversee water, electricity, natural gas, and so on. Second, most water systems are already “private” in some way due to outsourcing of anything from payroll processing and pipe manufacture to customer service and treatment plant construction. Competition for these goods and services often lower costs and improve service for water users.

So it’s probably a good idea to spend a lot more time on the quality of regulation, as regulators are the ones in charge of monitoring performance, punishing (or glossing over) failure, and helping municipal AND investor-owned utilities serve the Public.

“People need a human right to water”

At the base of our needs are water, food and shelter, but many people lack access to these goods (in either quality or quantity). The General Assembly of the United Nations declared a right to safe drinking water. The Millennium Development Agenda targeted “access to improved water sources and sanitation facilities.” Neither of these declarations made a big difference in people’s lives. In the former case of a “right,” progress was impeded by the larger issues of corruption and missing finances. In the latter case of a target, “victory” was declared when pipes were within 200m (600feet) of someone’s house, even if those pipes were dry or flowing with polluted water. The upshot is that 3 billion — not 800 million — people lack access to clean drinking water. (The case for sewerage is worse, on several levels.)

So what’s to be done? In richer countries, it makes sense to supplement the income of poor people, so they can buy food and water at the same prices as everyone else. (Low prices for everyone encourage waste; low prices for the “poor” cost more in bureaucracy than they deliver in water.) Low prices are an even bigger problem in poor countries, as they tend to benefit rich people with piped water service instead of the un-served poor in slums. Their best hope, in my opinion, is an encouragement of kiosk vendors who compete to deliver quality and greater pressure to replace lazy bureaucrats [pdf].

“Don’t flush — there’s a drought”

Although it’s true that a lot of drinking water goes down the toilet, it’s also true that flushing accounts for only a small share of total household water use. (Agriculture “uses” 80 percent of water in most countries, but irrigation and drinking water systems are managed in totally separate silos.) Where does most of the water go in drought-ravaged places? Lawns. Austin, Texas, is in the middle of a record drought, yet people can water their lawns as much as they want (once per week). Southern California is in record drought, and yet 60 percent of residential water goes onto lawns.

Demand for water increases with population and consumption patterns. We can’t shoot every other person to cut
water use by half, but we can surely afford to see some brown lawns. Brown lawns explain how Brisbane, Australia reduced water consumption to 160 liters per person per day (43 gallons). Green lawns explain how Las Vegans live “on the edge of disaster” — here’s their “out of water” countdown — while aiming to REDUCE water consumption to only 199 gallons (750 liters) per person per day. Seventy percent of Vegas water goes onto lawns.

We can live through droughts by storing runoff in reservoirs or — better — underground and lowering our daily consumption. Landscape with local (rainfed) vegetation to save money, save the planet and save your community.

* David Zetland recently publishing Living with Water Scarcity, which separately addresses private and social water issues. He now lives in Amsterdam.

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Comments (28)

1. jeff fisher  
   July 16, 2014 11:29 am

   This is a veritable garden of argumentative fallacies. Particularly the ‘perfect solution’ fallacy and ‘straw man’ arguments.

   The hippies are right. Bottled water is bad. The benefits of bottled water over filling your own bottle or cup do not warrant the costs for the individual or society. As I am not a fanatic I do buy it sometimes because I forgot my bottle, or whatever, however I make a very minor effort to avoid it and save myself $1 each time. It is, however, unfortunately common for people these days to drink almost entirely commodity bottled water, even pouring it into cups at home. Even in San Francisco where the tap water is ridiculously good. This is not a blanket condemnation of consumption, it is a condemnation of one type of flagrantly wasteful consumption. In Bangkok I have no criticism of drinking only bottled water because the tap water is actually not safe to drink (interesting: their bottles have a lot less plastic). Hippies have a number of such criticisms. SUVs that get horrible mileage. The scale of the US war machine. Etc. The fact that mitigating any one of these would not bring on a green utopia is an invalid argument.

   US agriculture wastes a huge amount of water in places where it matters. You yourself, in a different item of course, mention how agriculture uses 80% of the water in general (also true for California), and yet try to wiggle out of it by mentioning that they are managed differently. Well, yea, that’s rather the problem. Water use in general, and agricultural water use in particular is extraordinarily rigid for historical reasons and as a result water use when the supply is unusually constrained is somewhat nonsensical. The fact that it is hard to fix does not mean that those who notice the problem are wrong. Water is not entirely fungible because of location and infrastructure, but it is a lot more fungible than the structure of US water rights.

   In the US, right now, there isn’t that much difference between a private water utility and a public one as far as I know. However you cannot say the same about electricity. You cannot say the same about gas. You cannot say the same about data networks. You cannot say the same about privatized water in developing countries. The Hippies are well justified in their suspicion of privatized basic utilities. Right now it doesn’t seem to be a problem in the US, but it didn’t used to be a problem for electricity or gas and just recently has it been demonstrated that public data network utilities work so well.

   Most Hippies, I would think, would agree that the “human right to water” is not a big issue in developed countries, even the US. We provide very nearly universal access to safe drinking water (unless the person you are talking to has an extreme definition of “safe drinking water”). We have issues with contamination and rural supplies at times, but it is a maintenance level issue. But, yea, its a fairly useless idea. Sort of arguing about what specific category the problem belongs in, rather than doing anything to fix it.

   Hippies are correct that flushing your toilet less saves water. If they think that will ‘solve’ a drought they are wrong, but I am pretty sure you won’t find many hippies who think that. It is a way to avoid a small amount of unnecessary waste. I would guess that not many people who are avoiding flushing their toilet for #1 are continuing to water their lawns, but there is stupid all over so who knows. When I was a kid and there was a big drought near Seattle lawn watering was, by far, the biggest conservation measure pursued.
2. Fred
July 16, 2014 12:06 pm

Agreed! I don’t understand this strawman, what’s the point? Maybe we shouldn’t be living either because one day we’ll die. What a poor quality article trying to be “tongue-in-cheek”.

3. David Zetland
July 16, 2014 1:39 pm

@Jeff

You’re right about “overconsumption” but bottled water is no worse than, say, quinoa.

On ag water, you assert without any argument or evidence.

I’m not sure of what to make with the rest of your comment. Utility privatization is not “bad” per se, as regulation matters much more. In LDCs and developed countries, private services can do better than municipal, in terms of quality, price, etc. Or not.

I’m not sure that not flushing avoids “unnecessary waste”. San Francisco PUC had to dump bleach in the sewers a few years ago, b/c the drop in flushing (of all kinds) was messing up waste flows.

Thanks for seeing that there are no easy answers in water (as elsewhere).

4. Lyle
July 16, 2014 5:14 pm

One easy solution is to move to permanent bans on watering ornamental landscaping period. You could water a food garden but not ornamental plants. (And only with a hand held hose). Push for xeriscaping and gravel/stones for landscaping. If you look at the change in usage between summer and winter you will see what a big difference this could make.

One other item to save water is to continue the incentives to retrofit the old high water use toilets.

5. David Zetland
July 16, 2014 6:05 pm

@Lyle — Agreed. I usually say a ban on ALL outdoor watering, but there are two exceptions: (1) make water expensive then let people decide if they want to water outdoors or (2) allow watering for “productive plants” like eatables. But, then, can you defend carrots versus the play yard for the kids? Bans are hard to get right when people have different tastes.

(For the same reason, I do not support bans on bottled water but I *do* support the end to “free bottled water” at offices…)

6. Lyle
July 16, 2014 9:33 pm

Interestingly bottled water has existed at offices for a long while, it was just in big bottles. How many water coolers existed that had a multiple gallon bottle, and a device to cool/heat the water into small cups?

7. Beene
July 17, 2014 8:06 am

Anyone who would argue that public utilities are cheaper since privatizing has an agenda that not in the public interest.

A good is example is I pay 22 cents per KW in private market. My sister who’s town owns its utility is almost half this rate and lives only a 15 minute drive from me.

That is not to imply that the market can not keep prices low where there is competition for customers.
Another is the net and phones where not only does the USA have the highest rates it also has the slowest systems. Plus the worst coverage for rural areas. A good example of the net speed is Disk is offering 4MB in rural areas and buying it from Verizon; yet Verizon says it can only offer 3MB in rural areas.

8. **beene**  
    July 17, 2014 8:18 am  

I should have added Comcast phone and net which I had for about five years or more and the speed was much better at about 20 plus MB, but the price was $109.00 a month, for just net and phone for the five plus years I had the service till in 2013 they raised the price an I dropped Comcast.

9. **David Zetland**  
    July 17, 2014 8:41 am  

@Beane — You’re RIGHT about the importance of competition, but I disagree with your “not in the public interest” comment. You are citing a few data points. I could cite points on government provision of gasoline or phone service (neither common in the US). I could compare USPS to the privatized mail carriers in the Netherlands or Germany.

I am saying that regulation REALLY matters when competition is not present. That’s why LADWP is known for terrible customer service (and unsustainable water/energy policies).

The regulators make the rules, for better or worse.

- **run75441**  
  July 17, 2014 6:03 pm  

David:

You may want to consider “common carrier” status for water. I wrote similar about healthcare here:  
[http://angrybearblog.com/2014/01/on-the-horizon-for-healthcare-costs.html](http://angrybearblog.com/2014/01/on-the-horizon-for-healthcare-costs.html)

“A common carrier offers its services to the general public under license or authority provided by a regulatory body. The regulatory body has usually been granted ‘ministerial authority’ by the legislation created by it. The regulatory body may create, interpret, and enforce its regulations upon the common carrier (subject to judicial review) with independence and finality, as long as it acts within the bounds of the enabling legislation.”

Washington Monthly wrote earlier on it here:  

10. **beene**  
    July 17, 2014 8:53 am  

Yes, regulation does matter; and since the spawn of neoliberalism capitalism has become crony capitalism (competition almost non existent). Its like Verizon is really Xinfinity, just another way to confuse everyone, or give the appearance of competition in the market.

But the real issue of public utilities was the privatizing of the TVA which gave many in the south great service and prices for many years before it was privatized.

11. **David Zetland**  
    July 17, 2014 9:30 am  

@Beane — AFAIK, TVA is still public. I agree that crony capitalism is a disaster.

Remember that “cheap prices” are not always the same as “sustainable” prices, either for water service (under-investment in the system) or the environment (taking too much “free” water). On TVA, you may be interested in THIS post on “cheap” service: [http://www.aguanomics.com/2009/01/fixing-monopolistic-utilities.html](http://www.aguanomics.com/2009/01/fixing-monopolistic-utilities.html)
12. beene
July 17, 2014 12:02 pm

David, enjoyed your URL.

Greed is a human condition that’s hard to overcome. Fines and insurance are just cost, jail on the other hand would be great if we used it for other than the poor.

Have not lived in south since the early 80’s so may not be up-to-date on the TVA.

13. David Zetland
July 17, 2014 12:06 pm

@beene — jail’s a bit dramatic for civic issues. Prices, fines and insurance have been effective in changing behavior for ages, and they have HARDLY been used in the water sector. (Many people still use unmetered water, so there’s no “price signal.”)

I’m just trying to import some conservation tools into the sector 😊

14. beene
July 17, 2014 1:01 pm

The problem with fines, is if it’s a company it rarely high enough to cover the cost of repair. Water and land has been polluted since people and companies have produced waste. In most movies today almost all water looks brown, in spite of the fact we have done much to clean up past abuses. This does not negate the fact that it is almost always the taxpayer who pays for clean-up.

Many people go to jail for speeding, trespass, or minor drug charges. We can even be put in jail for donating to the wrong organization, civil dissidents, or even speech.

This is the reasons I favor jail for who ever is the owner of said company. This is no different than holding parents responsible for there children, which is becoming more common today with threats of jail and fines.

The real cure is to eliminate politicians need for money to stay or run for office.

15. coberly
July 17, 2014 4:45 pm

David Zetland

you know a great deal more than I do, and I believe you are one of the good guys

nevertheless i think that while us hippies may have not yet got all the details right and the things that can go wrong nailed down, we are almost certainly wiser than you are in re water as a human right and the too-much-danger in privatization to risk it.

until we reach the point where we start killing each other because there is not enough to go around, we need to insist that every person has a right to some basic amount of water, and small farmers have a right to enough to sustain their farms… as i said, the details remain to be worked out.

meanwhile it is true that governments are often lazy and stupid, that can in theory be fixed in a democracy. it is much harder to get the government to fix a private business. as you know, or should know, when there is a profit to be made the businesses end up owning the regulators. recent experience with “privatization” should scare the hell out of you. it does me.

and i am the resident old white man right wing shill for the rich on this site. btw “hippie” as you use it here is offensive. i think you meant it as a kind of a joke. probably not a very good joke.

16. David Zetland
July 17, 2014 5:29 pm
@Beene — In my paper, I discuss how “jail” will make managers SO CAUTIOUS that they will waste customers money on gold plated systems. It’s important to keep a balance between over- and under-spending. I use insurance companies because they have the deep pockets to pay for clean up. (We were lucky with BP — after not before — but not with “Freedom Industries”)

I TOTALLY agree about the money-politics problem! My solution is (1) take politics out of many pursuits (e.g., subsidies to farmers) and (2) public financing/no advertising 2 wks before election, etc.

17. David Zetland  
July 17, 2014 5:35 pm

@Coberly — I don’t quite understand your “demographic” but the “hippie” was a joke, except when it comes to knee jerk responses (see also, Tea Party).

I see where you’re coming from on human rights, privatization, etc., but it’s the DETAILS that do indeed matter. Read this op/ed (http://tinyurl.com/yezdcpk) on a human right to water and you will see that I am VERY worried about corruption. I see capitalism as one potential salvation for poor people.

I can’t really respond to the rest of your post — we should have a drink when you’re next in Amsterdam — except to say that monopoly power trumps: A good government can control a crooked business, but a crooked government can do what it wants to any business, good or bad. (On that note, check out my paper on land and water grabs: http://kysq.org/pubs/C33.pdf)

18. coberly  
July 17, 2014 5:58 pm

that’s okay, David. folks don’t get my jokes either. not even when I am very serious.

i have never been in Amsterdam, but my daughter has many times. She likes the beer.

We all have to go by what we know. In this country “privatization” is a scary word… except of course to the Tea Party.

19. beene  
July 17, 2014 9:27 pm

I take issue with you’re gold theory about not jailing civil and financial criminals. When we have electricity in explosive areas we require explosive fittings, yes they’re expensive but the failure to use them is even more costly; in life and property.

A good example would be a coal mine that had multiple safety violations on record that made national news when the mine finally blew up.

20. Tonu  
July 17, 2014 11:45 pm

I read AB and David’s blog regularly but rarely post. David’s point, as I understand it, isn’t a case of private or public ownership but rather adequate regulation. Public ownership of soviet nuclear submarines led to some very nasty consequences in their disposal.

21. David Zetland  
July 18, 2014 6:33 am

@Coberly — Yes, I agree that failed privatizations are a real worry. As Tonu points out, regulation is the key for private OR public monopolies.

@Beene — It’s tricky. If the mine had violations, should the owners go to jail after it blows up? What if the regulations said “shut down a mine with violations” but officials did not (“to protect jobs”)? I lean more on financial incentives (insurance) b/c they can be more effective and fair in pushing for the results you want. Murder? Jail, but water pollution or mine ventilation? We separate civil and criminal penalties for a reason. The issue is not their separation but their enforcement.
As we both know, there are endless examples of poor enforcement. Industry may bribe their way into that situation but who should go to jail? CEOs offering money or the politicians who take it in exchange for ignoring their duty to voters?

Accidents happen, but better incentives would reduce their frequency and harm. Regulations, markets and penalties all provide different incentives.

22. beene  
July 18, 2014 8:39 am

David, YES, all in the chain of events including government heads of departments. As Run posted its the regulators who interrupt and enforce the regulation.

Best example is recent testimony of the head of the veteran administration, though passionate was accused of lying, and evidence seemed to support

23. coberly  
July 18, 2014 9:13 am

David

I hope you will keep reporting to us on water issues, and that we will do something to responsibly manage water supplies with great care for the unintended consequences of what we do.

i don’t think it is productive to argue with you about privatization.

24. David Zetland  
July 18, 2014 9:17 am

@Run74577 — I missed your comment. “Common carrier” failed in the UK. Hard to mix different water in common pipes.

@Coberly — Come get an update whenever you want at aguanomics 😊

25. John  
July 23, 2014 4:41 pm

I have long ago cared about what Hippies think or do.

26. Blog round-up: Restoring salmon runs in the Sac Valley, water for the environment, groundwater and more, plus 5 things that hippies get wrong about water » MAVEN’S NOTEBOOK | MAVEN’S NOTEBOOK  
July 29, 2014 10:10 am

[…] Five things hippies get wrong about water: David Zetland writes: “Hi everyone. I’m a water economist, born and raised in San Francisco. I’m here to clarify a few misconceptions, help you understand how we get water issues wrong, and suggest how better policies serve social and private interests. Feel free to ask questions. — David*** 1. “Bottled water is bad”: This statement is often followed by observations on lax regulations on the quality of water in bottles, the need to fund public water systems, the oil and energy consumption from making and moving bottles, and some hostile words towards Nestle, Coca Cola and PepsiCo — the three biggest sellers of bottled water. All of these statements contain some truth, but they miss other dominant factors … ” Read more from David Zetland, guest blogging at the Angry Bear blog here: 5 things hippies get wrong about water […]