The Water Wars: Conflicts over water sources continue to grow

By David Zetland | Water Canada – Tue, 9 Sep, 2014

Google "water wars" and you will get 1.45 million search returns – more than "nuclear war." Does this statistic mean that water wars are more likely, more deadly or just more sensational? It's a a bit of each.

Water wars are definitely more likely. Even on a weak definition – one country upsetting another country with its water policies – we can say that there are more water wars (many) than nuclear wars (none). Mexico is upset with the way the United States drains the Colorado River, and Americans are upset with the way Mexico drains the Rio Grande. Chinese and Laotian dams on the Mekong threaten food security in Cambodia and Vietnam. The Palestinians suffer from Israeli control of their water resources and infrastructure. In each example, we see one country upset and frustrated with another's behavior.

But wait. Don't people die in wars? Oh yes, but they do not have to die of bullets and bombs. It's fairly certain that dead ecosystems have harmed Mexicans, that Mekong dams will leave Cambodians and Vietnamese hungry, and that Israeli irrigation has left Palestinian children thirsty. It doesn't take too much hunger, thirst and ecological stress before one starts to see bodies. Water wars are out there, but not in the hot-lead-in-the-belly sense that reporters with flak jackets love. Water wars come, slow as molasses, to suffocate us.

Most of you will not experience these wars directly. You live in a place where water bills represent a good value because they cover the cost of delivering abundant, clean water. The same is not true elsewhere. The United Nations says that less than one billion people "lack access to an improved water source" but this number – mostly in cities – includes people who can "access" a source that may or may not deliver drinkable water. Non-UN sources say about 3 billion people lack access to safe drinking water. Nearly half the world's population labors under this burden and the attendant threats to their life, liberty and happiness. Should we assume that matters will improve for these people? Not necessarily for them or us. The recent loss of drinking water in Toledo, Ohio, remind us that nobody is safe when the system fails.

What about the problem of sensationalism? Wars always represent "politics by other means," but water wars have their own character. It’s easier to win and
control land than water that follows the hydrological cycle. It’s clear that the United States "owns" land it captured from Mexico, just as it’s clear that Canada’s sovereignty extends right up to the 49th parallel (more or less), but it’s not so clear who "owns" the water that’s used, discharged and used again as it visits various countries. Water’s fleeting nature is further complicated by its capacity to absorb contaminants. The U.S. may choose to hold back Mexico’s water for its own irrigation or drinking purposes, but Mexico could retaliate by polluting U.S. reservoirs. The same holds for the Ethiopians and Egyptians, or the Turks, Syrians and Iraqis. Canada and the U.S. negotiate their interests through the International Joint Commission, but could the IJC stand the pressure if oil and gas interests stand to make – or lose – huge sums from depleting or polluting transboundary waters?

People often say that we will have wars over water in the 21st century in the same way as we had wars over oil in the 20th century, and that may be true. Twentieth-century "oil wars" were fought in boardrooms, offshore banks, law courts and the misery of the poor and dispossessed. "Wars" for scarce water will be similar in their grueling, confusing, unfair, and corrupt nature. In both cases, we see people trying to take what belongs to others; in both cases, they will use any tool at hand – legal or illegal, moral or immoral – to win.

So how can we reduce the frequency and damage from conflicts over water? Rather than follow the flow, I recommend following the money. It’s quite common to see water go to a special interest group within a nation with some rationalization of benefits to all citizens. Canadian politicians, for example, emphasize jobs while keeping quiet about profits and pollution. It’s very rare to discuss the harm to foreigners.

This dynamic suggests that the majority – should nations come to blows – would suffer to protect excess, unsustainable profits of a minority. That arithmetic suggests a solution, namely, devolution of water rights, management and control to locals who would negotiate with peers on the other side of the border. Negotiations between those who have water and those who want it (or those who are owed water by those who possess it) are more likely to result in win-win outcomes that negotiations in which distant politicians argue, but locals suffer.

**TOP 10 GLOBAL WATER HOTSPOTS**

**Turkey** – Completing dams on the Tigris and Euphrates will deprive both Syria and Iraq of their primary sources of water.

**India** – A long-standing disagreement over the Indus River, which flows from Kashmir into Pakistan, continues to be a point of contention. Meanwhile, India and Bangladesh continue to battle over the depleted and badly polluted River Ganges.

**Israel** – A dispute over the Jordan-Yarmuk system between Israel, Syria and Jordan has been simmering since the 1950s.

**Laos** – Erecting a dam on the Mekong River will affect the water supply to Cambodia and Vietnam.

**Tajikistan** – A plan to dam a tributary of the Amu Darya river has prompted Uzbekistan to impose tariffs and travel restrictions on its neighbour.

**China** – Conflict is growing over the Brahmaputra River, which originates in Tibet and feeds into India and Bangladesh.

**Ethiopia** – Ethiopia’s plan to dam the Blue Nile will stifle the flow of water to Egypt and Sudan.

**Senegal** – The west African nation has been battling since 1989 with neighbour Mauritania over grazing rights on the

---

The Mosul dam has become a flashpoint for conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The dam is just 390 km northwest of Baghdad. Photo: Reuters
Bottom Line: The potential for conflict over the quality and quantity of water flowing over local or international borders is increasing, and distant politicians are unlikely to reduce the harm that falls on the people who use and benefit from that water. That’s why users should manage the water they depend upon – no matter their jurisdiction or nationality – for regional prosperity. The alternative – conflict over ownership or use – risks harming both sides.

(Photos courtesy of Reuters)

**Water Canada** is the complete water magazine, covering environmental health, urban infrastructure, science and technology, law, policy and governance, and the national economy for “water nerds” who regularly read the publication in print and online across the country.

---

**Senegal River.**

**The Aral Sea** – Once the world’s fourth-largest inland lake, it’s now 10% of its original size due to diversion projects. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan still rely on it for water.

**Mexico** – Ongoing disputes continue between Mexico and the seven U.S. states that are fed by the Colorado River. The river is so depleted that it no longer reaches the sea.