The last oasis
Facing water scarcity

Sandra Postel
The Last Oasis: Facing Water Scarcity, Sandra Postel, Earthscan, 1992, 1853831484, 9781853831485, 239 pages. For decades now we have wasted and mismanaged the world's water supplies. Today, 27 countries are short of water, a quarter of the world's population has no safe water, 46 per cent have no proper sanitation and each year four million children die of water-borne diseases. As most of the world's major river systems cross several national boundaries, the scope disputes and the threat to international security is becoming more and more real. In The Last Oasis, Sandra Postel examines the economic, ecological and political factors affecting fresh water supply. She confronts the issues of mismanagement and profligacy and analyses and dangers of confrontation, both between nations and between rural and urban users. She also emphasises that the technology and know-how for effective water husbandry does exist. With methods already in use, farmers could cut their demand for water by 40-90 per cent, and cities by one-third, without sacrificing economic output or quality of life. Investing in water efficiency, recycling and conservation help meet rising demands and stave off disaster. But the priority is a common recognition of the gravity of the position, and with that a widespread push for institutions to manage sustainable use of water..

World Water Vision Making Water Everybody's Business, William J. Cosgrove, Frank R. Rijsberman, World Water Council, 2000, Nature, 108 pages. More than a billion people cannot get safe drinking water; half the world's population does not have adequate sanitation; within a generation over three billion will be ....

Water in the Middle East A Geography of Peace, Hussein A. Amery, Aaron T. Wolf, 2000, Business & Economics, 293 pages. Finding "streams in the desert" has never been more urgent for the peoples of the Middle East. Rapid population growth and a rising standard of living are driving water demand ....


Pillar of Sand Can the Irrigation Miracle Last?, , 1999, Science, 313 pages. The overriding lesson from history is that most irrigation-based civilizations fail. As we enter the third millennium, the question arises: Will ours be any different?.

Water Scarcity Impacts on Western Agriculture, Ernest A. Engelbert, Ann Foley Scheuring, Jan 1, 1984, Business & Economics, 484 pages.


The composting toilet system book a practical guide to choosing, planning and maintaining composting toilet systems, a water-saving, pollution-preventing alternative, David Del Porto, Carol Steinfeld, Apr 1, 1999, House & Home, 235 pages. Composting toilet systems and other ecological wastewater management methods are emerging as viable and cost-saving alternatives to wastewater disposal systems worldwide. Find ....

Who owns the water? , Klaus Lanz, Sep 15, 2006, Nature, 535 pages. "The shortage of fresh, clean water,a?? states a report by the Human Rights Commission, "is the greatest danger to which mankind has ever been exposed.a?? It is only thanks to ....


Water Wars Is the World's Water Running Out?, Marq De Villiers, 2001, , 413 pages. Water is as vital as air. But we can no longer take water for granted. Already more than one billion people are living in conditions of extreme water stress. Why are deserts ....
Dry spring the coming water crisis of North America, Chris Wood, Apr 28, 2008, Nature, 383 pages. Makes predictions about an imminent water-shortage crisis in North America, exploring the ways in which communities have the potential to be devastated by both droughts and ....

Water rethinking management in an age of scarcity, Sandra Postel, 1984, 65 pages.


World Water Actions Making Water Flow for All, Francois Guerquin, 2003, Law, 174 pages. This is a comprehensive guide to the available solutions to the world's growing shortage of fresh water. It analyses the scale and impacts of the problem for health and ....


We have taken for granted seemingly endless supplies of water flowing from reservoirs wells, and diversion projects; access to water has been key to food security, industrialization, and the growth of cities. In this book from the Worldwatch Institute, Sandra Postel explains that decades of profligacy and mismanagement of the world's water resources have produced signs of shortages and environmental destruction. She writes with authority and clarity of the limits-ecological, economic, and political-of this vital natural resource. She explores the potential for conflict over water between nations, and between urban and rural residents. And she offers a sensible way out of such struggles. Last Oasis makes clear that the technologies and know-how exist to increase the productivity of every liter of water. But citizens must first understand the issues and insist on policies, laws, and institutions that promote the sustainable use of water.

Imagine America going to war over water. Don't think it will ever happen? Think again. Water scarcity is a real problem, one which is growing exponentially. The fact that water seems so readily available and inexpensive (the "illusion of plenty" as the author states it), and people's overuse and lack of respect towards this life-sustaining resource are only some of the causes for the water crisis. Sandra Postel has written a stunning account which discloses the atrocious amount of neglect and mismanagement of water. Fortunately, there are solutions which offer hope for restoring and sustaining our essential lifeline, all of which are economically and environmentally friendly. Last Oasis is a red flag to farmers, industry and families, warning us that if the alternatives are not enacted, we are, most assuredly, destined for a worldwide crisis. -- From The WomanSource Catalog & Review: Tools for Connecting the Community for Women; review by SH --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Sandra Postel lives in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she directs the Global Water Policy Project. She is a Pew Fellow in Conservation and the Environment and a former vice president for research at the Worldwatch Institute. Her previous book, Last Oasis, now appears in eight languages and was the basis for a PBS television documentary.

Sandra Postel published LAST OASIS - FACING WATER SCARCITY back in 1992, year of the RIO Conference on Development and Environment, also called the Earth Summit. Re-issued in 1997 (with a new introduction) it formed the basis for a PBS documentary in the series "Cadillac Desert". Is it still relevant today? So much has been written on water issues since, from environmental concerns to promoting the privatization of water, that the question is valid.

Still, as we approach the 10-year review conference of RIO in Johannesburg, politicians, government officials, economists, environment and development experts and activists meet to take stock of what happened to the many promises of RIO - reflected in Agenda 21. In this context, it is interesting and useful to read LAST OASIS with a view to weighing the global water situation today against the problems and possible solutions outlined ten years ago.
Postel, a long-time specialist in environmental issues, traveled across the globe to review problem areas as well as conservation initiatives and solutions first hand. In addition to giving us an overview of the problems, she also outlined projects and initiatives representing a variety of approaches to address the challenges: either by living with and adapting to water scarcity or by finding solutions for preserving and replenishing the finite clean water resources available to us.

When it was published, Postel presented a comprehensive examination of the causes for water scarcity across the globe. Although not up-to-date anymore in terms of statistics, her analysis of the issues and her review of danger zones have not lost relevance. We are still facing the same dramatic divide: On the one hand, close to one billion people live without access to clean water and their daily requirements can only be met through enormous physical strain, in particular on women and girls who are the traditional water carriers. The inadequate water resources threaten the mere survival of the majority of the world's poor who live on the land and off the land to secure their livelihood with small-scale subsistence agriculture. On the other hand, water in industrialized societies, and also increasingly by the elites around the world, is treated as a cheap commodity: too often wasted and its safety jeopardized through carelessness and/or through industrial pollution. A major culprit in the long term destruction of safe water resources was then and remains today large scale agro-business. Postel argues the reasons for that and also reviews alternative and small-scale systems that have proven to be successful in delivering good crops as well as reducing the strain on the soil and the water table. Postel's 1999 book "Pillar of Sand" focusses on irrigation systems.

Is LAST OASIS still relevant today? Yes, it should be in any collection of books for those interested in and concerned with this most fundamental of environmental issues. It is a good starting point for informed debate on the future of water availability and safety. Will future generations debate a right to clean and adequate water? Postel's call for a new ethics on water and the development of a "water security" system do not go quite that far, but she makes a strong case for it. She argues on two major fronts. Water conservation can be achieved and encouraged through "proper pricing" of water and by creating incentives for wise water use. If industries, and in particular agriculture had to pay the real cost of water, efficient and ecological systems would be designed. Complementing this policy of water pricing would be a new "water ethic". This ethic would focus on our responsibility for comprehensive water ecological systems; it would have to accommodate our short-term needs for water with our long-term responsibility for water conservation. Postel knows that this ethic would require a major philosophical shift and that it would lead to other fundamental questions on quality of life, on the need to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots. It would change the agenda for economic growth towards ecologically based sustainable development. Read more.

This book is like one of those European tourbuses that promise to escort you through twelve countries in just seven days. If you're just there to make some deliveries, it's quite convenient. If you just want to have something to talk about with your friends, it's a means. If you've never been to Europe and want to familiarize yourself, it's exhausting.

I write this review over five years since the most recent edition, so the staying power of the book is clear. But it is ripe for a newer edition. An up-to-date copy of "The Last Oases" would be an excellent reference. And the original bibliography is certainly worth buying the whole book in any case.

This book is divided into two sections. The first, called "Trouble on Tap", is an overview of the water situation in many countries throughout the world. It looks at supplies, type and amount of use, and political factors. This is the weaker part of the book. Under each chapter heading, various countries or regions are addressed, and each time a new place name appears, clusters of concentrated statistics pop up like mushrooms after the rain. This approach makes actual assimilation of the facts nearly impossible. It relies on some fundamental understanding of the geography of river basins, politics, agricultural practices, etc. I think that rather than structuring the chapters according to engineering, politics, or farming, a better approach would be to deal with geographical regions one at a time. It's easier to grasp a host of facts about China than facts about a hairball of dams in China, Egypt, the U.S., and Russia.
The second part of the book, Living within Water's Limits, discusses how the world is solving its water problems. This part of the book was most interesting. When Postel describes, for example, industrial cooling you can place yourself inside a factory and walk through the steps with her. Her vivid explanation of microirrigation processes puts you out in the fields under the baking sun.

For anyone who is interested in water supply issues worldwide, this book is for you. I especially like the way the author is objective and presents both a realist and idealistic endeavor. I am from West Texas so I am concerned about water. The book gives great information dealing with how private business has been able to cope with water scarcity, and how farmers are using new methods of irrigation to provide food for the world yet conserving water. Also, it shows how these projects would have never taken place if government did not take action. It talks about water scarcity globally, and makes us understand how this can affect us locally.

For decades now we have wasted and mismanaged the world's water supplies. Today, 27 countries are short of water, a quarter of the world's population has no safe water, 46 per cent have no proper sanitation and each year four million children die of water-borne diseases. As most of the world's major river systems cross several national boundaries, the scope disputes and the threat to international security is becoming more and more real. In The Last Oasis, Sandra Postel examines the economic, ecological and political factors affecting fresh water supply. She confronts the issues of mismanagement and profligacy and analyses and dangers of confrontation, both between nations and between rural and urban users. She also emphasises that the technology and know-how for effective water husbandry does exist. With methods already in use, farmers could cut their demand for water by 40-90 per cent, and cities by one-third, without sacrificing economic output or quality of life. Investing in water efficiency, recycling and conservation help meet rising demands and stave off disaster. But the priority is a common recognition of the gravity of the position, and with that a widespread push for institutions to manage sustainable use of water.

acre-foot Africa Agriculture aquifer Aral Sea Bangladesh Calif California canal China Climate costs cropland cubic meters dams decade depletion desalination diversion drip drip irrigation drought ecological economic ecosystems efficiency Egypt engineering Environment environmental estimated Everglades farm farmers flow global water groundwater hectares High Plains increase India industrial water International irri irrigated area irrigated land irrigation systems Israel Jonglei June Lake last oasis Malin Falkenmark ment Mexico City Middle East million cubic meters million hectares moisture Mono Lake MWRA National Nile Okavango Delta percent plans plants Policy pollution private communication Program projects pumping rainfall recycling reduce region Research reservoirs reuse River basin runoff savings small-scale soil sources species Sudan sustainable Tamil Nadu technologies tion U.S. Water United urban Washington wastewater Water Conservation water demands water management water scarcity water supply water systems water-saving western wetlands wildlife World Bank World Population World Resources Worldwatch Xeriscape yields

Sandra Postel is the director and founder of the Global Water Policy Project. She is a world expert[citation needed] on fresh water issues and related ecosystems. From 1988 to 1994 she served as the Vice President for Research at the Worldwatch Institute. In 2002, Scientific American magazine named her as one of their "Scientific American 50" to recognise her contribution to science and technology. Postel's work aims to educate and inspire in order to promote the use and management of fresh water in more sustainable ways. She has written many papers on water conservation issues, and has made contributions to television presentations of environmental topics related to freshwater. Sandra is currently a Fellow at the Post Carbon Institute.

Having obtained her first degree, Postel worked as a natural resources consultant with a private firm in Menlo Park, California. In 1983 she joined the Worldwatch Institute, her first project being the compilation of research on worldwide water issues, which was her first opportunity in her professional life to study international water issues. From 1988 to 1994 she served as Vice President for Research. She left the Worldwatch Institute in 1994 to found the Global Water Policy Project. Starting this major project enabled Postel to collate all of her wide-ranging water interests under one umbrella.
It is no coincidence that human civilization sprang from river valleys and floodplains. Access to water has been crucial to our food security and to the growth of cities and industries. In recent times, the fortunate have come to take water for granted: Endless supplies seem to flow from dams, reservoirs, wells, and diversion projects. But for decades now we have wasted and mismanaged the world's water. Engineering projects, ever larger as demands spiral upward, have created an illusion of plenty even in the midst of scarcity. Gross underpricing has concealed the need for careful management. We have come to view water strictly as a resource that is there for the taking, rather than as a living system that drives the natural world on which we depend. We are entering a new era - an era of water scarcity. The signs are evident the world over: shrinking lakes and seas, depleted river flows, and falling groundwater levels. Chronic shortages could unfold this decade in much of Africa, northern China, pockets of India, Mexico, the Middle East, and parts of western North America. Already 26 countries have too little water to support their populations sustainably. We hear rumblings of potential war over water in the Middle East. And competition for supplies is brewing between city-dwellers and farmers around Beijing, New Delhi, Phoenix, and other water-short areas. In this, the third volume in the Worldwatch Environmental Alert Series, Sandra Postel examines the limits - ecological, economic, and political - of water. Postel, vice president for research of the Worldwatch Institute, writes with authority and clarity of these emerging threats to our future. And, perhaps most important, she offers a disarmingly sensible way out of such struggles. Last Oasis discloses that the technologies and know-how exist today to make every drop of water go further, decreasing the likelihood of both scarcity and conflict. Postel shows us that with currently available methods, agriculture - which uses the lion's share of fresh-water resources - could cut its demands by 10-50 percent, industries by 40-90 percent, and cities by one-third. All this with no sacrifice of economic output or quality of life. Successful, cost-effective strategies are already up and running. Boston, Massachusetts, reduced its water use 16 percent in four years, thanks largely to home water-saving devices, industrial recycling, and repairing leaks - at a cost only a third to half as much as conventional proposals to expand the supply. Some 70 percent of Israel's sewage gets treated and reused to irrigate 19,000 hectares of farmland. In Germany, state-of-the-art paper manufacturing plants use 100 times less water to produce each kilogram of paper than older factories elsewhere. In much of the world, it turns out, ways to conserve water and use it more efficiently represent the least costly and most environmentally sound options for achieving water balance. And so far, Last Oasis discovers, they have barely been tapped. A key challenge is to reform government policies that now price water far below its worth, perpetuating the illusion of plenty. Beyond such practical measures, Postel calls for a new water ethic - one that makes the protection of water ecosystems a central aim in all we do, and that compels us to use less whenever we can, and share what we have. If we fail to understand the limits of water, Postel reminds us, we may learn the hard way the truth of Ben Franklin's adage, "When the well's dry, we know the worth of water". 

The book Last Oasis: Facing Water Scarcity by: Sandra Postel, was not a bad book to read to obtain knowledge about water scarcity. Overall, the book was pretty good. Though the beginning of the book, I thought, was really boring because it contained too many statistics and it was overwhelming. However, the second half of the book was pretty well explained without throwing your mind around with statistics because that part of the book explained how factories to reduce water use worked. I had no problems with this book and I would suggest people to read it however, the only really bad part about the book is that it is pretty old so most of the facts and predictions the author made are off but, other than that, the book was pretty good.


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