



DOWN THE DRAIN

BY JOANNA FLATT

Snow, sleet, rain and hail are all-too-familiar trademarks of Ontario's climate, and while we may grimace and solemnly retrieve our toques and umbrellas, the rest of the world eyes us with envy. As Canadians, we boast almost 6.5 percent of the world's renewable freshwater supply, among the largest owners of the limited resource. Access to water guarantees adequate sanitation, agricultural growth and drinkable reserves – the basic tools for life. Yet action to improve world distribution and security of water remains minimal; even the World Watch Institute has declared that “water scarcity may be the most underappreciated global environmental challenge of our time.”

And while the grass may seem wetter on this side, Canadians face a substantial amount of environmental, corporate and social pressure that may threaten the future of our supply: melting glaciers caused by climate change; wetland destruction; water-intensive farming practices; urban sprawl; and concrete landscapes have all significantly impacted the renewable attributes of water. The Great Lakes provide 45 million people daily with access to potable water, out-pumping 4 trillion tons to support its demands. However, only 1 percent of what we remove is naturally renewed every year, not a positive statistic given humanity's infinite water needs.

The potentially lucrative value of water or its more appropriate name, liquid gold, can also pose significant risks to the future of Canada's aqua control. Increased recognition of its monetary returns has prompted certain parties, looking to line their pockets, in a push towards ownership and commoditization. Governments must also be wary: Without proper water regulations and under the fallacy that Canada has abundant water supplies, provincial leaders have accepted the sale, extraction and pillage of precious glacial water to foreign-owned bottling companies for a minimal fee, reducing accountability and the likelihood of responsible sales or renewal procedures.

We privileged Canadians are also accustomed to an unbridled standard of water use as the second largest consumers worldwide, after the United States. According to 2006 estimates, Torontonians use approximately 248 litres of water per day, while the average African citizen uses only six. Modern luxuries have also afforded us the need to use more water: a breakdown of water consumption reveals that 90 percent of domestic water use is for showering, laundering and toilet flushing. The solution might not be a regression in our hygiene regimens but, rather, the pursuit of alternatives for reuse and conservation that Canadians have taken limited action to explore.

If Ontarians want to stay afloat in the growing water crisis it is necessary to consider other, yet equally familiar, origins of water. Rainwater harvesting, a commonly used method of water conservation, is a

relatively simple technique that many countries have found effective in collecting reserves and reducing reliance on mainline water. Mainline water refers to the city's water supply, the primary source for our needs. In Toronto, mainline water is taken from Lake Ontario, pumped to treatment centres, and then redistributed throughout the city. In contrast, collected rainwater has already arrived at its destination. Homeowners can leave their gathered water outside for irrigation purposes or transfer it inside to supplement regular demands. Given that the largest use of water occurs during toilet-flushing and laundering, the water that is collected can be reused, often with minimal treatment methods. The choice to supplement mainline water also reduces per capita demand on Toronto's energy resources, since the current delivery process, from lake to tap, accounts for 33 percent of the city's annual electricity use. By using less mainline water we are not only reducing their annual electric bill, but also the amount of water taken from neighbouring lakes, thus saving our resources for a non-rainy day.

The City of Toronto has shown some interest in pursuing rainwater strategies, but not for the purpose of decreasing mainline water usage. As part of the Wet Weather Flow Master Plan (WWFMP) the City is encouraging the catchment of runoff from downspouts to decrease excess water following intense storms, which if not captured can lead to contamination and flooding, particularly in urban areas. Unfortunately, equal ends are not always just cause for action.

Even if we want to retrofit our homes for the reuse of rainwater indoors, there is currently no Canadian-made solution on the market. Not surprisingly, many water-deprived nations have come to the rescue, offering tools and methods for which the water-affluent can also benefit. While Canadians have largely been pacified by a perceived overabundance, the time has come for us to put aside our outdated views and raise our rain barrels in support of progress.

For more information on rainwater harvesting, visit RiverSides Stewardship Alliance, www.riversides.org. □

Joanna Flatt recently completed her undergraduate studies at McGill University, majoring in Socially Responsible Business and International Development. She spent her final semester studying water in Barbados and assisting with the launch and development of an organic farming consulting enterprise, the Organic Agricultural Services (OAS). In the coming months, she will be bicycling across the United States to engage in popular discourse with community groups and schools to discuss the state of the environment and the economy.

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