

6 *fresh*water



The water in your glass may have fallen from the sky as rain just last week; but the water itself has been around pretty much as long as the Earth itself. So maybe you have been sharing a drink with a dinosaur.

For most of us, water comes out of a tap. But many millions of people have to walk many kilometres to a well and then carry the water home each morning, before their families can drink. For others, their only source of water is a dirty pond or river. One in every six of us – more than a billion people – do not have reliable clean drinking water.

However it comes, water is essential for people, for plants, and for animals. We need water to drink, to cook, to wash – and to flush the lavatory. We need roughly 50 litres of it every day to lead a healthy life.

And that does not include the water many communities need to irrigate fields and make their crops grow. In a lot of countries, watering crops uses up to 80 per cent of freshwater supplies.

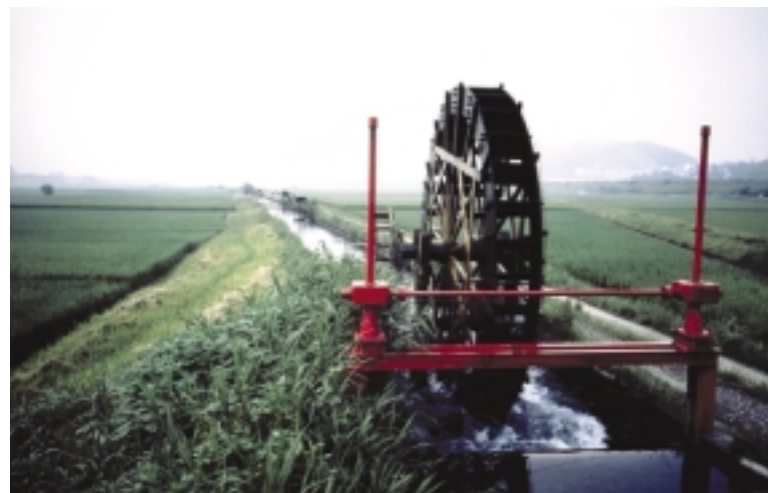
For large numbers of people, especially the rural poor in developing nations, gathering water is an essential part of their daily routine. During the dry season, the nearest water may be an hour's walk away. Often, children are kept off school to go and collect water for their families.

In shanty towns and poor urban areas, people may have to queue for hours to get water from a communal tap – or from a water seller, who may charge more for a can of water than richer people pay for a regular piped supply.

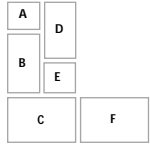
The United Nations says that the proportion of people without clean drinking water must be halved in the next 12 years. Governments promise to spend more to bring clean water to every community, alley and household. But many communities are doing the job themselves, sinking wells, catching rain from roofs and building small dams to stop rainwater running away.

	A
B	C
D	E

PHOTOS:
A. DAYO N GASTONI/UNEP/TOPHAM
B. KO KYAW SUNN/UNEP/TOPHAM
C. UNEP/TOPHAM
D. DOAN DUC/UNEP/TOPHAM
E. IWAO YAMAMOTO/UNEP/TOPHAM

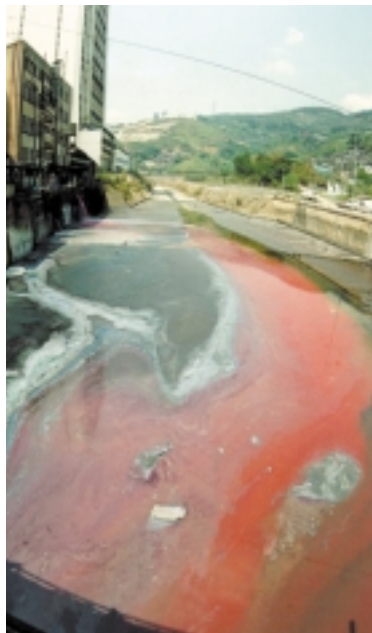


foul water



PHOTOS:

- A. ANGEL CAROLLO/UNEP/TOPHAM
 B. PEACE CHILD INTERNATIONAL
 C. LISA MANISCALO/UNEP/TOPHAM
 D. SIU WOON-YING/UNEP/TOPHAM
 E. YANG ZI JIANG/UNEP/TOPHAM
 F. JOTA CORNEA/UNEP/TOPHAM



We depend on water to live. But we also pollute our water by using it to take our waste away. Dirty, smelly liquids trickle down shanty alleyways; city sewers empty into rivers; and big factories dump their waste into the sea. We all do it.

Chemicals and oil kill wildlife. We've all seen the pictures of big pollution disasters from oil tankers. But for humans the big killer is sewage. When it pollutes drinking water, it brings epidemics of diseases like cholera and typhoid, and diarrhoea.

Doctors say that, at any one time, half of the poor people in developing countries in Africa and Asia are sick because of diseases caused by dirty water.

That's mainly because some 2.4 billion people do not have proper sanitation, whether a flush lavatory attached to a sewer pipe or a properly designed dry lavatory or cesspit. Every day, around a billion people squat at squalid pit latrines in shanty towns. And another billion make do with fields or streams, railway lines or roadsides, buckets or plastic bags.

Many women and girls, shamed by this, wait till the night time before they go at all.

The United Nations has promised to try and halve the proportion of people without safe sanitation by the year 2015. But however you do your toilet, doctors say the most important thing is to wash your hands afterwards – in the cleanest water you can find.

