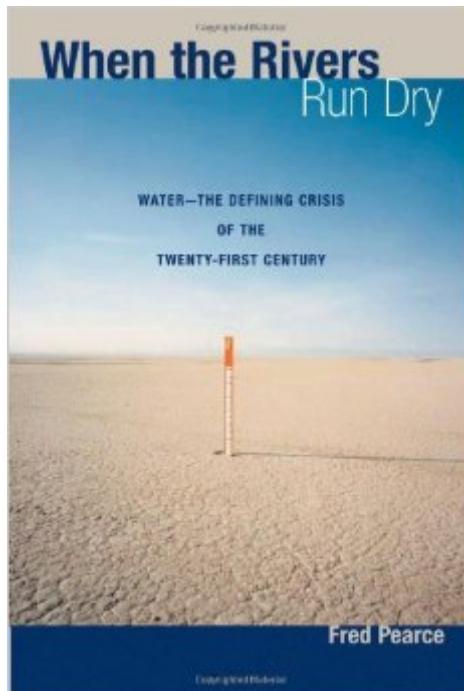


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# When The Rivers Run Dry: Water--The Defining Crisis Of The Twenty-first Century



## Synopsis

In this groundbreaking book, veteran science correspondent Fred Pearce travels to more than thirty countries to examine the current state of crucial water sources. Deftly weaving together the complicated scientific, economic, and historic dimensions of the world water crisis, he provides our most complete portrait yet of this growing danger and its ramifications for us all. Named as one of the Top 50 Sustainability Books by University of Cambridges Programme for Sustainability Leadership and Greenleaf Publishing.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

British author Fred Pearce has collected together some of the most interesting, nerve-wracking, disappointing, and infuriating stories and statistics on water politics worldwide into this gripping volume, titled *When the Rivers Run Dry*. The depth with which Pearce treats the subject and the diversity of angles from which he approaches the issues facing water management (and rather more often the appalling mismanagement) makes this book required reading for those who wish to be environmentally literate. Actually, let me elevate that statement to say instead that this book should be required reading for anyone over the age of 15, regardless of their language or nationality or cultural background. Many people think that water comes from the tap in the same way that milk comes from the carton, and this simplistic ignorance is dangerously impermissible in a supposedly educated society. Pearce's work is illuminating and educational while also being an engaging read, and given the fact that water is even more fundamental to life than oil is, everyone should know

much more than they generally do about the water cycle. More to the point, we need to know how that cycle supports human life and civilization, and how it is being disrupted and abused for selfish political gains, economic control, and narrowly commercial self-interest. This abuse is being perpetrated by a handful of breathtakingly arrogant government bureaucrats, working in concert with wonkish engineers disconnected from ecological realities and corporate thieves seeking to commandeer common and collectively-held resources for their own private empires. Prepare to be shocked, dismayed, and appalled as you read about what has happened to the world's rivers, lakes, marshes, and estuaries. Worse yet, you'll likely be disheartened by what is planned for the future. Said future looks grim unless the world's people wake up to what is happening and disallow the destructive centralized planning that is threatening to wreak massive negative change upon what remains of the world's freshwater ecological systems. No nation is exempt from the potable fresh water crisis, although the most immediate and well-publicized dilemmas are occurring in arid and semiarid regions. It is indeed logical that water is one of the most embattled resources in arid regions, but Pearce demonstrates that even rivers in abundantly wet areas suffer under environmental strains as varied as climate change, hydroelectric projects, and pilfering for export to drier neighboring climates. From Cambodia to Israel, and from Mexico to Germany, Pearce dedicates chapters to specific types of water-related problems that will astound you and will hopefully act as a wake-up call to action before it is too late. Lest I give the impression that the book is nothing but doom and gloom, it is important to state that the final few chapters end on a positive note, with success stories and reversals of major and catastrophic disruptions giving a glimpse of light at the end of the dark water tunnel. Solutions with widespread applicability to many neighborhood situations are explored, and there is always the possibility of small local movements turning into global grassroots phenomena. One can take heart in the tentative steps towards sustainable water use being made in places like rural India and downtown Los Angeles even as the looming specters of unparalleled water shortages cast long shadows over those regions. Anyone who has ever read *Cadillac Desert*, Marc Reisner's seminal book on water politics in the Western United States, will want to read Fred Pearce's *When The Rivers Run Dry*. This is a definitive work on worldwide water issues, and ought to take its place in the annals of environmentalist and social justice literature as the message filters through the aquifers of the public's subconscious. Tapping the well of knowledge where water is concerned is going to be critical to global survival. We are all in the same boat, so to speak.

This book deals with a very important subject and describes the author's first person observations

with passion in a very readable manner. However, the book suffers from several glaring flaws. First, almost every page has a discussion based upon at least one major statistic. Unfortunately, the source of none of these statistics is provided. There is no bibliography, no footnotes or endnotes. A critical reader is given little help in following up on the issues raised. From a policy perspective, this book will not be helpful to anyone attempting to persuade non-believers. Second, the discussion eventually becomes repetitious. I don't mind that he is clearly extremely biased, but after a while the diatribes grow tedious, and detract from an otherwise impressive presentation. It is a real shame that such passion and effort should result in a book that doesn't share the sources of the research so that others can verify its contents and persuade others to take action.

This is a good book if you like first-person accounts with no notes that fail to mention other stellar works. I confess to being spoiled by Marc de Villers "WATER: The Fate of Our Most Precious Resource," and by David Helvarg's "Blue Frontier: Dispatches from America's Ocean Wilderness" as well as William Langewiesche's "The Outlaw Sea: A World of Freedom, Chaos, and Crime." It also falls second to "The Winds of Change" and to "The Weather Makers" (I tend to read books in sets to tease out varying perspectives), and ties with "Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum." The author's most exciting idea, absolutely worthy of global implementation, is to call for the marking of all products with their "water content." He is stunningly education, truly original within my reading as reviewed at when he itemizes the amount of water needed to create a pound of rice or any of a number of other products. I would advise any future leader to demand that products be labeled as to their water content, their oil content, and their chlorine content (see my review of Joe Thornton's "Pandora's Poison: Chlorine, Health, and a New Environmental Strategy." The author notes that the US is exporting ONE THIRD of its water in the form of products that consumed that amount of water. Other highlights from this book, for me personally: Six water winners are Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Indonesia, and Russia, with Mongolia as a water wild card. Treaties about water are out of date. Technologies, including cement as an answer for re-directing water, are mis-directed. 97% of the world is sea water--this suggests that we need a MASSIVE global desalination program to protect aquifers from further salination and deterioration (from my own experience: \$100M will buy a desalination plant capable of desalinating 100M cubic meters of water a year, or Navy ship or an Army brigade with tanks and artillery, or 1000 diplomats, or 10000 Peace Corps missions, or a day of war over water. It's about trade-offs, and we are not making them wisely. Kashmir is about Pakistan's Achilles heel, water. India is on a path to destruction. "Water mines" are selling water for \$4.00 (four dollars) a TRUCK TANKER LOAD, and basically mining

India dry. When the author comments about a "spate of suicides" among Indian farmers, he fails to mention that this number runs toward 2,000 a year dead by their own hand. He predicts aquifer busts in India and China within 20 years, at which point, as other authors discuss more ably, disease, migrations, crime, and poverty will be as plagues unto those two nations. Dams produce methane from rotting vegetation, with 8X the greenhouse effect of a coal powered plant of the same capacity. This should in the author's view change the Kyoto calculations. The author is very strong on this point, and suggests that breaking down dams and not building more (e.g. China) should be right up there with global warming as issues for action. He notes that the 6 day war in the Middle East was about water, but neglects to mention that Israeli agriculture is using up 50% of the water stolen from the Arabs through underground pipes, yet produces less than 5% of Israel's GDP. I was most taken with the author's discussion of "barefoot science" which emerged during his discussion of toxic or poisoned water such as found in Bangladesh. He cites with great admiration one individual who went from village to village testing wells, with very crude tools, providing reliable estimates of toxicity for 10 cents per well. A fine book, some excellent insights, but it did leave me a bit cranky. Marq de Villier's book is still the best in class.

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