

# Water, Water Everywhere but Not a Drop to Drink

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In September I had a chance to spend an evening doing something I treasure: walking the sandy shore of Lake Michigan. Strolling along, letting the chilly water tickle my toes, the thought struck me that I had aged thirty-eight years since the first time I stepped ankle deep into the lake at four years old. (You do the math!) News about recent droughts have convinced me to start conserving water, but the huge volume of that Great Lake makes the idea of water shortages seem farfetched.

The facts tell a different story, though. The earth is 75 percent water, but only 1 percent is drinkable. The Environmental Protection Agency reports that we have the same amount of water as we did two billion years ago, but the demand for water has increased along with the earth's population. For instance, the U.S. Geological Survey estimates that 300 million Americans use a total of 408 billion gallons daily. According to the EPA, thirty-six states in the United States anticipate local, regional, and statewide water shortages by 2016, and shortages already plague almost 40 percent of the world. Here in the United States, high demand upstream drains the Colorado River dry before its waters reach the ocean.

High demand strains our resources, and climate change is shrinking seasonal water stockpiles, the source of the world's great freshwater rivers.

Glaciers and mountain snowfalls have been melting at accelerated rates. I was shocked when I read in the November/December 2009 issue of *Sierra* magazine that some scientists believe there will be *no* glaciers in Glacier National Park by 2030.

We simply can't live without water. How do we start conserving it?

**Think differently.** Now that we realize our water supply isn't infinite, my family has been trying to use only what we need, struggling to adopt new habits. I try to take shorter showers, make sure I always wash a full load of dishes in my dishwasher, and shut off the faucet while I'm soaping up my hands or brushing my teeth.

A family water audit can be revealing. Use the fun, family-friendly worksheets entitled "A Day in the Life of a Drop" on the EPA's WaterSense website ([www.epa.gov/watersense/teachers/index.htm](http://www.epa.gov/watersense/teachers/index.htm)). Involving the kids motivates everyone to change. I was amazed at how much we can conserve with little effort. Sites such as [www.eartheeasy.com](http://www.eartheasy.com) and [www.greener.com](http://www.greener.com) also contain pages of water-saving tips and products.

#### **Reset, retrofit, and replace.**

Changing my habits is hard; changing my settings and devices is a cinch, even though I don't have a handy bone in my body. Water use accounts for 12 percent of household energy use, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. The EPA states, "If one out of

every 100 American homes retrofitted with water-efficient fixtures, we could save about 100 million k[ilowatts] of electricity per year—avoiding 80,000 tons of greenhouse gas emissions. That is equivalent to removing nearly 15,000 automobiles from the road for one year!"

At our house, we keep our water heater at 130 degrees (below that, some detergents may not work effectively). We've been retrofitting our showerheads with low-flow models and installing aerators on our faucets. I try to use products with the WaterSense label, approved by the EPA.

Eventually we'll replace our old toilets with low-flow, energy-saving versions, also labeled WaterSense. Larger devices and appliances should be replaced with energy-efficient models when they wear out (look for WaterSense or EnergyStar labels). High-efficiency clothes washers use only one-fourth of the water as top-loading washers and spin much faster, saving drying time. You can claim tax credits for some appliances—check [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov) for a list of credits for homeowners.

Wasteful water habits are as hard to break as any other habits, especially when we are used to having plenty. But cutting back preserves our own water and energy resources, saves us money, and prepares us for a drier future. ■

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