



Apocalyptic Warnings About 'Water Wars' Too Pessimistic, Too Premature

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The shenanigans in Flint, Michigan, made me think about people and water. Today, more people than ever have access to drinking water (see chart 1). Yet, freshwater reserves are falling throughout the world (see chart 2). What are we to make of these global trends?

As ever, the alarmists were well ahead of the curve. Back in college, I remember reading about the likelihood of a military conflict between Israel, Jordan and Syria over the water from the Jordan River. Turns out, water scarcity is much less of an issue in a region torn apart by sectarian strife, but a deluge of apocalyptic warnings continues unabated: "Water Wars," "Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution And Profit," "The Great Lakes Water Wars," "Blue Gold: World Water Wars," etc.

On the upside, it is useful to remember that 71 percent of the world's surface is covered by water. The trick, therefore, is not to have access to "water" *per se*, but to have access to "drinkable water" (and agriculture-friendly water).

In the short run, there is space for more efficiency. Precision agriculture, such as that practiced in Israel, is a good start. But, in the long run, plentiful water is likely to depend on plentiful energy.

In some places, like the desert kingdoms of the Middle East, people get water by burning oil in desalination plants. Ideally, however, countries with plenty of sunshine will be able to switch to a more environmentally-friendly solar power in the future. The price of solar energy has dropped by 99.5 percent between 1977 and 2014. And while I am aware that solar is not yet price-competitive with fossil fuels, and suffers from well-known problems (cloudy days, space and storage), I am hopeful that in the not-too distant future humanity's concern over freshwater resources will disappear thanks to solar power and desalination.

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