

Water Pollution

North America is blessed with abundant water. Canada alone has 20 percent of the world's fresh water. But there are regional shortages, especially in the American Southwest.

Today, our two countries' water quality is threatened as never before. New regulations have cut the amount of pollutants flowing directly from municipal sewage treatment and industrial plants. But it is possible to detect pesticides, toxic metals and industrial chemicals in many of the lakes and rivers we depend on for our water. The pesticides come from agricultural runoff and aerial spraying of forests and residential areas; toxic metals and chemicals come from industrial sources, and from consumer products dumped down the drain.

Lake Erie, which washes the shores of both countries, provides an example of what we can do to clean our waters, and what remains to be done. By 1960, the lake was considered "dead" because of the accumulated effects of municipal sewage, fertilizer runoff and industrial waste. Thick green mats of algae floated on its surface; beaches were littered with dead fish. But through a joint program between the U.S. and Canada, more than \$9 billion was spent on new sewage treatment plants and other measures. Phosphates, which pollute the lake, were banned from laundry detergents; industrial discharges were restricted. As a result, the lake lives again. It is used for recreation; fishing is coming back. But hundreds of dangerous chemicals can still be found in its waters. Some comes from industrial discharges; some, from municipal and agricultural runoff. Some comes from overhead; much of the contamination in all the Great Lakes comes from air pollutants drifting down from the sky. It will be much harder to control these sources.

Water is growing scarcer in some areas. Intensive irrigation aids agriculture, but much of the water is lost to evaporation. Groundwater supplies are diminishing, and some have been contaminated by hazardous chemicals.

Dirty water affects more than the fish. Most water treatment plants kill bacteria, but do nothing about chemicals. A hundred years ago, villages would dump their waste downstream, while taking drinking water from upstream. Today, we all live downstream.