

Is the Next Big Green Issue Blue?

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We take water for granted every time we turn on a faucet. We expect water to be available in the right place at the right time. Can you imagine being threatened with drought or with polluted water carrying diseases like dysentery? These situations force us to realize how important this life-giving essential is to our survival. Currently, 2.8 billion people live in places with some degree of water scarcity, and it is predicted that 75 percent of the world's population will by 2025¹.

The biggest green challenge we face in the future is a shortage of water—clean, accessible water. World globes show blue bodies of water, clearly larger in mass than brown land. The melting of polar ice releases captive water that impacts those masses with climate changes. Water constantly moves through the hydrological cycle—evaporating from the surfaces of bodies of water, soil, plants, and glaciers—making clouds, and raining or snowing back to Earth. What hits the ground soaks in and becomes groundwater, moving horizontally, very slowly until it eventually reappears in surface water, continuing its cycle. That cycle affects the earth's water supply, 332.5 million cubic miles of water. That sounds like a lot but 96 percent to 97 percent of it is saline. Of the remaining 3 percent fresh (non-saline) water, nearly 70 percent of it is glacial ice, 30 percent is groundwater, and less than 1 percent makes up our rivers, lakes, and swamps². Worldwide, water usage has increased six-fold over the last century, twice the rate of our population growth; and the world's population is expected to grow from 6.5 to 9 billion by 2050¹.

Water is critical to life. It goes well beyond the every day uses of drinking, eating, bathing, growing food, and washing laundry. Water transporting consumes energy. Water is a major component in processing materials, manufacturing, sanitizing and maintaining ecosystems.

In the big picture, some interesting experiments in global policy and technology are taking place. Communities are building watershed protection programs that cross boundaries of states and nations, as water does. Many industries, aware that their future profits depend on clean water, make their conservation programs part of their bottom line. World organizations, such as the United Nations, are exploring broad spectrum innovations, assisting the world's poorest while promoting corporate stewardship.

On a local scale, interior designers can be instrumental in the solution to our blue dilemma. Not only can we become active in our community water decisions and consciously conserve water in our daily activities but we can influence our clients and their environments.



First we must learn about [WaterSense](#), a partnership program sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The WaterSense label promotes water-efficient products with a label backed by independent testing and certification. WaterSense labeled products are usually about 20 percent more water efficient than their less efficient

counterparts in the same category. For example over the course of a lifetime, you will likely flush the toilet nearly 140,000 times. If you replace older, existing toilets with WaterSense labeled models, you can save 4,000 gallons per year. In addition, WaterSense labeled products perform their intended function as well as or better than their less efficient counterparts.

Nationwide, more than 1 trillion gallons of water leak from U.S. homes each year. It is up to us in the design profession to be aware of the “blue” issues and to encourage clients to conserve water by replacing or at least repairing leaking fixtures such as toilets, faucets, and showerheads. A leaky faucet or showerhead that drips at the rate of one drip per second can waste more than 3,000 gallons per year. Or consider this equation - a showerhead leaking 10 drips per minute wastes enough water in a year to run the dishwasher 60 times. Specifying the WaterSense products for replacement is a step in the right direction. Or share this Website to learn how to fix water leaks - <http://www.epa.gov/watersense/fixaleak/howto.htm#leaks>.



Interior designers are in the business of improving homes and businesses by creating well-designed environments. As an example, retrofitting a house with WaterSense labeled fixtures could save a family of four approximately \$2,000 in water bills over the lifespan of the products, let alone a major savings of consequential water use.

Social consciousness is an essential part of what we practice. The first step is to gain a confident understanding of the issues. The second step is to specify “green” and “blue” products that are solution-driven. And the third step is to effect an environmental change in the lifestyle of our clients by applying our knowledge, expertise and talents. Interior designers are empowered to be cutting-edge in effecting change for the sake of the future generations. The challenge is to start today to passionately convey the timely importance of the “Blue” issues.

References:

Keri Luly, LEED AP. *EnvironDesign Notebook: H₂O: The Next Big Green Issue is Blue*, September 2009.

<http://www.epa.gov/WaterSense>

Footnotes:

1. Bergkamp, Ger & Sadoff, Claudia W. *Water in a Sustainable Economy, State of the World 2008: Innovations for a Sustainable Economy*, Worldwatch Institute.
2. United States Geological Survey, *Water Science for Schools*, <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu>.