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# Eco-Justice Notes

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## *Slurp*

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There's a rude sound coming from the suburbs of Denver. It is being heard in many other parts of the world, too. And it has me worried.

As my parents tried to teach me basic manners, they told me that it is not nice to suck the last drops out of a glass with a straw. That loud slurping sound is not polite behavior.

The rude sound in suburban Colorado is not coming from flocks of youngsters in fast food joints, schlorping up the dregs of their gigantic soft drinks. It is coming from the region's municipal water providers, and from families with private water wells. The region's groundwater supplies are the cup, those wells are the straws, and many of them are sucking air. Slurp.

Picture two high school sweethearts at the malt shop (yeah, it is an old-fashioned image), sharing a single beverage with two straws. How cute! But in these water situations, there are hundreds of straws, and nobody is staring lovingly into their neighbor's eyes.

The problem in Colorado, and elsewhere, is that the underground water sources -- the subsurface rivers and lakes called aquifers -- are being depleted much faster than they can recharge. The groundwater supplies are, in theory, a renewable resource. Water seeps down through the soil and along rock formations, and it will replace the water that is removed. But that seepage is slow, and in dry regions like Colorado, there's a limited amount of surface water to soak in. Too many wells, and too many water users, can draw out far more water than what can be renewed. Slurp.

The immense aquifers that sustain the southern edge of Denver are falling by an estimated 30 feet per year. That giant basin, where deep gravel beds are filled with water, is being sucked dry. All across the basin, every year, the top of that vast pool of water is lowered by the equivalent of three floors on an office building.

Put a well into the aquifer, and poke it a healthy 100 feet into the available water. That's great -- if the aquifer is being recharged. But at current usage rates, the well starts to fail in three years. That means that wells are being drilled deeper and deeper into the limited water supply, pumping from an ever smaller pool. One growing town 25 miles south of Denver expects to spend \$250 million over the next 50 years for deeper wells into a dwindling aquifer. Slurp.

As regional planners consider the future trends for their communities, with full awareness of over-tapped water supplies, what do they see? Booming growth! The region's population is expected to more than double in the next 35 years. Right now, 179,000 people are sucking out more water than the aquifer can provide. The planners expect 406,000 folk to live in the area by 2040. **Slurp!**

Where's the water going to come from? As I read the news accounts, it sounds to me like many local officials

are praying for rain, even as the climate experts are predicting long-term drought and reduced snowpacks. New and larger dams are proposed to store the sparse mountain runoff that is not already captured and used. And cities plan to drill ever deeper wells. Slurp.

Farms out on the eastern plains of Colorado have old wells with "senior" water rights. (Under Colorado law, the oldest claims have priority when supplies run short.) The cities which have depended on the rapidly-declining aquifers are buying up agricultural water, and pumping it long distances to support their current needs. Those distant aquifers are dropping, too. *Slurp*.

Denver and other big cities on Colorado's eastern plains are already pulling lots of water from the west side of the Continental Divide, drawing on tributaries of the Colorado River. Mountain towns high on the western slope are seeing their streams profoundly diminished by these diversions. The conflicts over water supplies and water rights run all the way to Las Vegas and Los Angeles, because the Colorado River is over-allocated, and there are more claims for water than that river can provide in an average year. **SLURP**.

A regional summit meeting on water this week recognized the importance of cooperation. Denver's Mayor spoke to the gathered leaders, and put it in stark economic terms. "If Douglas County runs out of water and has to suspend building permits, and that gets into Time or Newsweek, (then) that affects the value of every home and business in our region." Well, yes, that would be one consequence of over-using this limited resource.

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Fights over limited water supplies are not new. In Genesis 26, Isaac quarrels with other herders about water and wells. In today's world, though, we're not dealing with a few grumpy neighbors, but with the viability of metropolitan areas and regional economies.

The situation around Denver makes it a vivid local issue for me, but this is a global problem. Delegates to the World Council of Churches Assembly last February affirmed that "access to freshwater supplies is becoming an urgent matter across the planet." Their resolutions declares, "The survival of 1.2 billion people is currently in jeopardy due to lack of adequate water and sanitation. ... Unequal access to water causes conflicts between and among people, communities, regions and nations."

That slurping sound is more than rude. It may lead to wars in years to come.

Fresh water -- for drinking, for agricultural use, and for the sustaining of the natural world -- is a limited resource. Ethical questions of water ownership, pricing and use are becoming urgent in local communities, and on a global scale.

A new documentary, produced by the United Church of Christ, deals with global issues of water supply, quality and privatization. *Troubled Waters* will be shown on ABC stations beginning on October 22. Check with your local station, and ask when they will be showing the film. I urge you to use the program, along with your local headlines, as the basis for discussions in your church about critical water issues.

*Shalom!*

*Peter Sawtell  
Executive Director  
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