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STORY

How Cape Town Defeated Day Zero—for Now

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BY JACQUELINE FLYNN

Cape Town residents fill their water jugs at the Highlands Spring. Image by Jacqueline Flynn. South Africa, 2018.

With a dozen empty plastic water jugs slung over her shoulders, Rukayah Salie hurries across a busy road in Muizenberg just outside of Cape Town, South Africa and joins the thirsty Capetonians queued up to collect free, clean drinking water from the roadside tap.

“This water tastes the best,” she said. “And it’s more efficient than driving to another spring, especially during Ramadan. This is the only water I drink and cook with.”

Salie has been visiting the spring once a week for the last 6 months—since restrictive water limits were placed on Cape Town residents facing a once-a-century drought.

Today, Cape Town demonstrates impressive progress in water conservation—and people like Salie who changed their daily water habits, whether by commuting to a spring or using hand sanitizer instead of soap and water, deserve a big share of the credit. The little changes made the biggest difference.

Back in January 2018, the Cape Town water crisis captured world headlines while the city absorbed the realization that it might be facing day zero: the day the city would shut off its taps and citizens would have to travel to scheduled water dispensing points to collect a daily water ration. As officials began to release planning details, stunned Capetonians realized that the threat they had dismissed for nearly a decade was real: After 3 consecutive years of dire rainfall shortages, they were going to run out of water.

On January 1, 2018, the city announced an official limit for sustainable water use of 450 million liters per day for the entire province and declared Level 6 water restrictions, capping household water use at 50 liters per residence per day. Over 6 months, the city issued tenders to build 3 emergency desalination plants, and reduced agricultural use by 60%. The city raised funding to research water saving and recovery technologies and water source diversification—moving away from reliance on the city’s dwindling reservoirs as the main water source.

Efforts to identify the roots of the crisis resulted in a murky blame game, with significant political fallout for city authorities accused of failing to anticipate the situation. City bosses, who had expected to make provisions for a drying climate somewhere off in the distant future, were blindsided when the crisis arrived sooner than predicted. Suddenly they had to conjure up solutions to a far more urgent need.

But as dire as the situation at the southern tip of Africa has become, Cape Town is not alone. In February 2018, BBC News reported on research (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-42982959) suggesting that 11 major world cities will run out of drinking water by 2040. London, Tokyo, and Miami are 3 of the global hotspots to make the list. Already, an estimated 2/3 of the world's population lives in drought conditions for at least one month every year. Los Angeles is facing one of the region's most severe droughts in history. Drought is a global issue.

"It's not somebody else's problem because it's going to be everybody's problem," says Chris Kets, a South African filmmaker, who has reported on the water crisis for ABC and CNN.

The crisis delivered some unexpected upsides: Residents like Salie who rush to the springs are not driven just by the water limits or the global threat. A water-wise movement has swept the region to the extent that locals have permanently changed the way they view water. Many will admit it took being on the brink of running out of water to change their view. On every street corner, in every public bathroom, and in every storefront, "Defeat Day Zero" posters emerged, serving as a constant reminder of the situation's severity.

"Sometimes, it takes playing with people's emotions," said Johannes Prins of Cape Town's Water and Sanitation Department. "It's not just giving people information. It's helping people to understand the information, to understand why they need to change."

The Berg River Dam in May 2018. Image by Jacqueline Flynn. South Africa, 2018.

Many residents have taken the crisis to heart, putting in the effort to access alternate sources of water such as natural mountain springs or collecting rainwater. But there are some, including Helen Moffett, a local water activist, author and blogger, who have long advocated a water-wise way of life.

“I grew up in the Karoo where we never had a dependent water source. I have always prioritized saving and repurposing water. My friends made fun of me until Day Zero was announced, and now they are begging for my help,” said Moffett.

Moffett’s middle-class household in Noordhoek is almost completely independent of municipal water. Every drop is accounted for. Walk into her house, and buckets of water are found at every counter. Instead of a standard shower, she uses an insecticide pump to create a powerful spray that dramatically reduces the water

needed to get clean. She even takes a 5-liter water container with her every time she leaves the house so she doesn't leave what she calls a water footprint, equivalent to the now-common idea of a "carbon footprint."

"I'll take it to my friend's houses and use it to flush the toilet. Or if I'm in a restaurant and they're already using gray water, I will leave the jug in the stall for someone else to use in their home," she said.

Another water-wise Capetonian, celebrity chef, and organic urban farming advocate, Justin Bonello, has been vocal about citizens' responsibility for sustainable water use. Bonello uses his property for personal use, but also to aid his cooking and career in sustainable urban living. He has redesigned his property so that not a drop of water runs off it.

"I try to mimic forest floors on my property to reduce flushing water away, and I never ran out of water, even with the drought." He has managed to maintain his rainwater tanks throughout the drought, arguing that his techniques show that it is possible to sustain food and water, even in a drought.

Moffett and Bonello have made it their business to appear on TV and radio shows to spread awareness of the severity of this crisis and to share information about their lifestyles to motivate people to make small changes. Moffett's book, 101 Water Wise Ways, is filled with simple changes people can make in their everyday lives.

Moffett argues that offering incentives provides the biggest opportunity for behavior change. Making it easy for people to feel they have succeeded through showing them how simple changes can have a measurable impact on their water use has made her something of a local celebrity.

Despite the ups and downs Cape Town has faced over the last few years, perhaps the biggest lesson from the water crisis is the dire need for people to take the water-wise movement seriously. No one is safe from drought. But if Cape Town has shown us anything, it's that little changes can actually make a big difference. The challenge isn't making the daily changes, it's getting people to listen to make the changes.

As Helen Moffett wrote, on her blog, “The truth is that many of us have realized this truly is the new normal: We are never going back to assuming that water will always come out a tap whenever we want it to. I see little changes everywhere.”

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