

ASSESSMENT PIECE: At the Mercy of Mother Nature

How many random cell mutations and evolutionary successes had to take place for the human race to evolve to where we are today? We would not be here were it not for one small compound. Water. Who would have thought that two hydrogen atoms bonded to an oxygen atom would create such an important life resource? Water was, and always will be, a key factor for all living organisms to survive on this planet. The human body can survive without food for more than seventy days yet only three to eight days without water¹. We can find it anywhere: lakes, rivers, glaciers, oceans, water vapour, soil and even within our own bodies. Water covers 71 percent of Earth's surface², however, only 2.5 percent of that water is actually fresh to consume³. It's a fact that we need water to survive. So what happens when it starts to disappear?

Cape Town, the second most populated city in South Africa, came very close to being the first major metropolis to run out of water. As a result of three years of incredibly low rainfall and a growing population, Cape Town was running out of water - and fast. Day Zero was looming where the government would switch off all water supplies to businesses and homes in the city in order to conserve as much as possible. Hospitals and other institutions, where water is a necessity, would still get a regular supply. However, city residents would have to queue up at various water points in order to collect their daily limit while security stands on guard. Day Zero has since been postponed but it is important that we understand it has not disappeared completely. There are millions of people around the world who live without sufficient access to safe drinking water - approximately 850 million people globally according to the World Health Organisation⁴. Cape Town, however, is a developed city and it is not the first to be threatened by severe drought. Melbourne was warned that it is 'little more than a decade away from exhausting current water supplies'⁵ and at one point in 2015, São Paulo had less than twenty days worth of water supplies.

It is crucial that the world realises the Cape Town water crisis is not an isolated issue. We should all look at how we use water in our own lives in order to understand the action that needs to take place to minimise further damages. Think about it. Your morning routine. You get out of bed.

¹ Thomas C. Weiss, *The Phases of Starvation - what happens when we starve*, (Disabled World, 2016) <<https://www.disabled-world.com/fitness/starving.php>>.

² USGS, *How much water is there on, in, and above the Earth?* <<https://water.usgs.gov/edu/earthhowmuch.html>>.

³ National Geographic, *Freshwater Crisis* <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/freshwater/freshwater-crisis/>>.

⁴ BBC News, *Will Cape Town be the first city to run out of water?* (2018) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-42626790>>.

⁵ Aryn Baker, *What It's Like to Live Through Cape Town's Massive Water Crisis* (Time) <<http://time.com/cape-town-south-africa-water-crisis/>>.

You go to the toilet. You flush the toilet. You wash your hands. You brush your teeth. You wash your face. Perhaps you also have a shower. The clothes you put on have been washed using water. The coffee you make to drink was grown using water. The cow that provides you with the milk you have with your cereal needed water to produce it in the first place. The average UK consumer uses around 150 litres of water every day. Residents in Cape Town were limited to 50 litres per person, per day, and they were fined if they failed to comply with these regulations⁶. As Amar Batra explains, ‘it is time for us to realise that water is not a renewable resource we are entitled to use as much of as we desire’⁷.

Having lived in South Africa for a few years of my childhood, I understand the challenges faced with water restrictions. During periods of drought, there were hosepipe bans where we were not allowed to water the garden, wash cars or refill the swimming pool. If we went over our allocated amount of water, there would be fines to pay. Our water usage was limited overall and this instilled the importance of water conservation in me from a young age. The water restrictions in Cape Town are a lot more severe than those I have experienced. Nevertheless, the threat of running out of water stays with you for life and forces you to consider your every move when it comes to water usage wherever you are in the world. Talking to friends of mine from Fish Hoek has made me even more aware of how far a bucket of water can go in dry times. Dirty water from washing a few dishes can be used to flush toilets or water a few areas in the garden. Their showers are limited to once or twice a week where the grey water will also be reused for other purposes. After hearing the way my friends and many others have to live because there is simply not enough water to go around, it infuriates me when I see how people in other developed areas of the world continue to leave the tap on whilst they brush their teeth and fail to turn the tap off when they leave a public bathroom.

What I find most terrifying about the whole Cape Town water crisis is the lack of publicity about it on various social media platforms. Most people who live in areas where water continues to flow out of the taps without a restriction on usage do not seem to be fazed at all by the fact that a major city almost completely ran out of water to survive. Of course, the latest celebrity to announce their split online may be considered interesting news but where would we all be without water? How would people around the world rally to help those threatened by water limitations? When will another Day Zero arise? No matter where we live or what we do; we will always be at the mercy of Mother Nature.

⁶ BBC News, *Cape Town drought: South African city may avoid ‘Day Zero’* (2018) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-43321093>>.

⁷ Amar Batra, *Cape Town Water Crisis: A terrifying global trend* (The Daily Campus, 2018) <<http://dailycampus.com/stories/2018/3/30/cape-town-water-crisis-a-terrifying-global-trend>>.