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# WATER SCARCITY AND THE HUMAN FACTOR – FINDING COMMON GROUND

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**By Stephenie Griffin**

Many children in classrooms around the world can recite the steps of the hydrologic or water cycle– evaporation, transpiration, condensation, precipitation, and runoff. It is the natural process of water moving from the ground to the atmosphere and back again. A continuous cycle that doesn't add to or take away from Earth's ecosystems. But is it really as simple as we were taught in elementary school?

In theory, the amount of water on Earth should never change given this looped process. The problem occurs when the water cycle is disrupted by outside factors. These disruptions can be caused by natural events or human interaction. Often, what is seen as progress becomes a catalyst for water scarcity or water stress.

For example, dams prevent rivers from flowing naturally and distributing needed water to surrounding vegetation. Freshwater sources can become unusable due to pollution from local factories. Paving roads seal the surface of the ground preventing it from absorbing runoff, leaving underground aquifers unreplenished.

Climate change directly affects the balance of the water cycle making droughts more common and longer lasting. Global temperatures in 2023 were almost two and a half degrees higher than they were in the preindustrial era. The hotter temperatures increase evaporation and transpiration elevating the possibility of drought and plant stress.

#### **Water Scarcity vs. Water Stress**

Water scarcity occurs when there is a shortage of the actual volume of water in an area.

Water stress is the lack of ability to access water to meet necessary human demand.

UNESCO predicts that by 2025, just under two billion people will be experiencing water

scarcity and half of the world will be living in water stressed conditions. In sub-Saharan Africa, water demand is expected to increase 163% by 2050, further exacerbating the water-stressed situation.

**Impact of Water Scarcity in Niger**

Currently, over two billion people worldwide do not have access to a water source that is safely managed with 1 in 3 lacking basic sanitation as well. In Niger specifically, the leading causes of death among children under five are waterborne diseases and diseases caused by poor hygiene and improper sanitation according to UNICEF. Only 13% of the population has access to even the most basic sanitation services. Because of traditional gender roles, water stress has a greater effect on Nigerien girls and women. Many walk an average of four to six miles each day carrying a 44-pound container of water.

**Broader Implications of Water Scarcity and Water Stress**

Over half of the world's total water demand is used for agriculture, and insufficient water is a contributor to famine risk in times of drought, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Demand for water is also disproportionate from region to region. The average American family uses almost 500 gallons of water each day which far exceeds the average African family who only uses about 5 gallons per day. Water scarcity also threatens peace between neighboring countries whose boundaries share underground aquifers. Two-thirds of Africa's freshwater sources are transboundary.

**Finding Common Ground**

Despite the setbacks and challenges, Wells Bring Hope, along with others in the global community, continues working to provide clean water and proper sanitation for all. Earth and its atmosphere coexist seamlessly through the water cycle until there is a disruption. Closing the gap between water demand and access is an opportunity for humans to find common ground with the Earth's natural cycle and create an equitable future for all.

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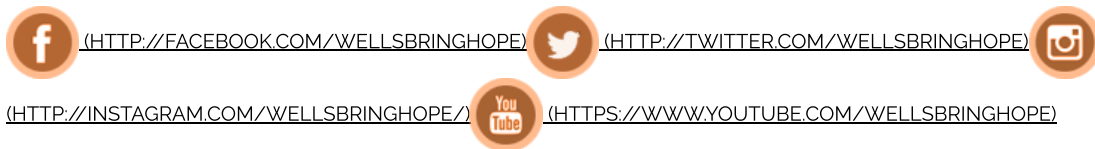
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