

Reflections of a water guru 1

Water politics and how they will impact the future of agriculture

The Witness 15 Oct 2018 DUNCAN HAY • Duncan Hay is the executive director of the Institute of Natural Resources and an associate research fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal



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LARRY Swatuk — interesting name, interesting and nice guy. We had a few drinks together at Crossways earlier this year. He is a university professor from Canada and a water expert, and has had an over 30-year association with Africa. He has that strategic “helicopter view” that many of us locals lack.

Swatuk recently published the innocuously titled book *Water in*

Southern Africa — it’s available from UKZN Press. It is a small book but contains some very big thoughts; the content is definitely food for thought. I share some of his reflections and my own thoughts.

First and most obviously, the water problems we encounter and will continue to encounter are human-made so, just as we make them, we can unmake them. And,

in unmaking them, we need to think far beyond water itself to how we live our lives. Do we eat grain-fed beef with its huge water footprint or do we eat free-range beef with its smaller footprint, or do we eat meat at all? Do we begin to see poo and pee as valuable nutrients and begin the journey to other forms of faeces and urine management, or do they remain things we wastefully flush away?



Second, and quoting Swatuk directly: “... we musn’t mistake urban water issues for issues of water scarcity”. What he means by this is that, depending on where and how we live, for our personal needs we require between 50 and 300 litres per day. I have, for years, been shouting about how wasteful we are in the uMngeni catchment where we use on average about 220 litres per day. I was naïve and oversimplified things. If we include the water use of the food we eat we are actually using between 1 600 and 5 000 litres per day. The inability of water service providers to get water to people’s homes has very little to do with scarcity and a lot more to do with political will, or lack thereof.

Third, we need to take a close look at where, what and how we grow the world’s crops. The bulk of global agricultural production (82%) is rain-fed. It does not require irrigation. We need to make sure that we optimise this production, ensuring that as much rainfall as possible passes through the root zones of food crops. We also need to make sure that, in optimising crop performance, we protect and support small-scale farmers so they do not become slaves to large irrigation systems, producing only crops such as biofuels that they cannot eat.

Linked to this is a famous quote stated in many different forms but, most simply: “Water does not necessarily flow downhill, more often it flows towards money”. Water flows very well to Wembley and Montrose but very poorly to some areas of Edendale. It flows very well and very inexpensively

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Excellent article on an informed way forward to sustainable water management. It has (and

to large-scale commercial irrigators but very poorly to small-scale and subsistence farmers.

Fourth, he makes the point that, despite all the speculation that countries will go to war over resources such as water, history tells us the opposite. There have been very few “water conflicts” and, instead, there are hundreds of international agreements that mediate the fair allocation of water between countries.

Instead of worrying about the potential for conflict between states and drawing on the previous point, we should be far more concerned about the “water war that is being waged against the poor”. And this is not only about poor individuals; it is about global inequality.

It is about how the “affluent north” which accounts for 80% of global income, it is literally sucking the “poor south” dry through its obscene consumption.

Finally Swatuk reflects that, as it relates to water, the world finds itself at a point between two fundamentally different paradigms; the paradigm of the past comprising a “top-down” development agenda driven by technical experts and engineering solutions, and a future of integrated water resource management (IWRM) where stakeholders make decisions at river basin and catchment scales in a collective process, and where nature-based solutions play an increasingly important role. As we are discovering, making the transition between these two paradigms is hard work.

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