

# Our water footprint

by Simisha Pather-Elias, BotSoc

This edition's article was inspired by my recent trip to the state of New Mexico in the USA. My journey started in El Paso in West Texas, where I was met by a burst of the hot dry winds blowing across this vast desert. The temperatures were in the mid-forties, humidity less than 10% and the 'mighty' Rio Grande River (known as Tiwa by Native Americans) a mere trickle – but still separating the USA from Juarez and Mexico. I only spent a day there but it was enough to give me a taste of what I was about to see as I travelled up this inhospitable land following the path of the Spanish on the *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* up to New Mexico, the 'Land of Enchantment'.

Met by the Yucca Tree, an array of cacti and South African succulents in the desert, the towns of Las Cruces, Albuquerque and Santa Fe were all founded along Rio Grande River. The water is mostly used for agricultural purposes. Pecan Nut Trees, the most thirsty and prevalent crop in this area, are fed by flood irrigation directly from the river using communal canals called *acequias*. However tightly controlled this process is, there is little to no water by the time it gets to borders of Mexico. This is due to a mixture of over-consumption, water rights and the regularity of snow melt.



ABOVE: The Rio Grande River Gorge outside Taos, New Mexico. Photo: Simisha Pather-Elias.

This has left many cities now dependent on groundwater resources for drinking and industrial use. Was it just me who found the combination of desert, intensive agriculture and flood irrigation to be illogical? I wondered about the ethics surrounding food export of water-intensive crops while damaging the ecosystem and leaving people downstream without water.

While this scenario is somewhat different in South Africa in that our cities and the main agricultural lands are not located in deserts, we face similar problems with water shortages as a result of the arid climate and poorly maintained infrastructure. We certainly don't want to be faced with the same situation as that of New Mexico!

### So what can we do as consumers to conserve water?

- Invest in rainwater collection.
- Use a low-flow showerhead to save water and electricity and install aerators and flow-reducing valves for your taps which decrease the amount of water.
- Consider only flushing your toilet when there are bad odours emanating from it.
- Use a water-efficient dishwashing and laundry machine – and do full loads only.
- Sweep outside instead of hosing.
- Avoid buying bottled water which has a high energy footprint through packaging, distribution and disposal. Tap-water is good enough and sometimes better.
- Use products that have a low-water footprint, e.g. drink water or tea instead of carbonated drinks, eat more vegetables instead of meat and consume natural rather than processed foods and goods.
- Buy locally made products instead of Chinese goods which mainly drain the Yangtze River.
- Group plants that need the most water near the house and in containers on the patio for easy access.
- Farmers should consider switching to drought resistant crops.
- Support car washes that re-use their water and use biodegradable detergents and environmentally friendly sprays.
- Educate your family, friends and neighbours on wise water use.
- Volunteer at a local environmental group to help conserve wetlands and riparian areas in your district.

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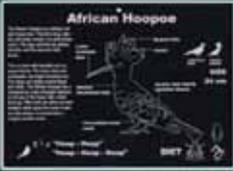
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Let us do things the right way from the start before we land up in dire straits, destroying complete ecosystems and having to turn to energy intensive desalinated water or over exploit our precious groundwater reserves. Think about those people who will have no water when the river dries up.

### READING

Water Footprint: <http://www.waterfootprint.org/?page=files/home>.