Opinion & Analysis

Wasteful habits the source of global water shortage

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Adelaide is the first city in the developed world to suffer permanent droughts, but it is unlikely to be the last

THEY CALL it the lucky country. Australia's nickname comes from a book of the same name, published in 1964 by social critic Donald Horne. He was, however, being ironic. Australia, he suggested, was "a lucky country, run by second-rate people who share its luck".

Horne's point was that, while other industrialised countries created their wealth through technology and innovation, Australia's extraordinary natural bounty of natural resources, climate and distance from trouble spots meant prosperity had come too easily.

And, as we've witnessed closer to home, from good fortune springs bad habits. Now, though, Australia's luck, like its water, appears to be running out. Nowhere is this being more powerfully felt than in the Murray-Darling basin, an area of southeast Australia as large as France and Spain combined. The region is in the grip of a seven-year drought.

Farmers have been restricted to as little as 16 per cent of their annual water allocation. Authorities warn that water supplies for the two million Australians who live in the basin cannot be guaranteed beyond next year.

The first three months of 2009 recorded its lowest inflows in the 117 years since records began. Agriculture in the region has been devastated. Rice production has been especially hard hit, with output down from more than one million tonnes a year to barely 20,000. Why anyone would think of growing rice at all in the semi-arid Murray-Darling basin is perhaps the real story here.

When Europeans settled in this region in the mid-19th century, they cut down 15 billion trees to make way for sheep, cattle and a range of water-thirsty crops nature never designed for Australia. The once mighty Murray river has in recent decades been reduced to a trickle by the relentless demand for irrigation water. As often as not, it fails to even reach the sea.

In keeping with its affluent, happy-go-lucky lifestyle, Australia is now among the world's worst polluters, with per-capita emissions more than double the European average. Australia is also the world's largest coal exporter, with much of its output fuelling the furnaces of Chinese power stations.

For a country whose wealth has been largely built on exporting pollution to be in the grip of a climate crisis as the effects of these emissions start to bite is a harsh reminder that, on a small blue planet, what goes around, comes around.

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Adelaide is now regarded as the first city in the so-called developed world to be in a permanent state of water shortage. It is unlikely to be the last. Within the next five years, at least 36 US states will face deepening water shortages. The continued existence of anomalies such as Las Vegas, a grand folly plonked in the middle of a desert, is now in question.

"Take one world already being exhausted by six billion people. Find the ingredients to feed another two billion . . . Use only the same amount of water the planet has had since creation, and don't forget to restore the environment that sustains us. Stir very carefully."

So goes an introduction to a new study on global water from the World Economic Forum. A meeting in Dublin yesterday hosted by the Institute of International and European Affairs was told that many parts of the world are on the verge of "water bankruptcy".

The report, entitled *The Bubble is Close to Bursting*, says that, in the absence of dramatic reforms, over the next two decades water scarcity will have a profound effect on global and regional systems, "whether from an economic growth, human security, environmental or geopolitical perspective".

Finding replacements for oil is extremely difficult; for fresh water, it is impossible. In the 21st century, water is quickly taking on the political and economic significance that oil enjoyed over the last hundred years. Already, regional conflicts are simmering; China and India are anxiously eyeing one another as their shared freshwater resource in the Himalayas succumbs to rapid glacial melting.

Today, 2.8 billion people, or 44 per cent of the world's population, live in areas of high water stress, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. This will rise to almost four billion by 2030 based on present trends. The livelihoods of one in three people on the planet will be threatened by water scarcity within 15 years.

Water shortages by 2025 could cut global crop yields by one-third, or the equivalent of the entire grain crops of the US and India combined. Feeding an extra 80 million people a year is only part of the problem. A quarter of the extra grain needed is simply to meet the growing demand for meat.

The typical meat-rich Irish diet consumes about 5,400 litres of fresh water a day. We each consume the equivalent of 2,000 tonnes of water a year, the bulk of it "virtual water" embedded in the foods we eat and products we buy. Want to fit 120 litres of Australian water into a single glass? No problem, just turn it into wine first.

Ultimately, the global water crisis is as much about how we use – and misuse – water as the actual amounts. The true value of fresh water is only understood in its absence.

Meanwhile, recession notwithstanding, Ireland persists with the lunacy of being one of the few countries on Earth that does not even meter, let alone charge, for our most precious commodity.