

Ten good things about Cape Town's drought

By [Patrick Dowling](#)

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Beyond the clamour around who's to blame, conflicting scenario descriptions of Day Zero and its predicted date, individual and community responses and helpful tips, the drought, now officially the worst on record without historical precedent, has done us all some good.



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1. It has heightened public awareness of the reality of climate change impacts. The 'debate' idea pushed by those too attached to or invested in the old order of doing things should have been firmly put to bed by now. The 'new normal' concept can't be limited to water only either - fires, migration, health, economy and security are patently part of the picture and an holistic response is required.

2. The world takes note with apprehensive interest. Remarkable is that even at Davos, the favoured, cool and well-watered Swiss meeting site of the World Economic Forum where talk is usually about, well, economics, free trade and all the other good, not particularly green things we expect from world leaders, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi started the week by telling the 2,500 strong audience that climate change is the greatest threat to civilisation.

He was followed soon afterwards by our own Cyril Ramaphosa who added that "Climate change is a reality. We're facing a real total disaster in Cape Town which is going to affect four million people." Meanwhile, other water stressed cities like Los Angeles, Sao Paulo and Singapore consider who will be next. The [17 SDGs](#) (Sustainable Development Goals) which South Africa signed up for in 2015 come into 3D perspective.

3. Realising that leaders global, national and local can do only so much, communities have started working cooperatively and innovatively together. There are domestic street- and faith-based responses, workplace plans and frail support initiatives. As people work together, mesh talents and grow trust, more dots are joined, giving issues of sustainability and cooperative solutions new meaning and practical application direction.
4. There has been a rapid water literacy and numeracy upgrade across society. People are interested and it is important to know that 25 litres of water weighs 25kg or where it goes if you have to flush it, what a catchment is and what happens in it.
5. Talking of flushing, the drought has foregrounded the very longstanding but politically constrained topic of the need to move away from water borne sewerage. Sufficient water meant the more affluent could afford this luxury. Scarcity means we all need to make a plan - good, appropriate, technically sound ones that should see the saving of at least 30-million litres of water per day. Add to this modifications in all the other waste water pursuits we get up to and the savings become enormous. A few years back, controversial water academic and activist Anthony Turton said South Africa does not have the dilution capacity for all its pollution. That's even truer today. By addressing the problem as Plan A, we start mitigating the degradation of rivers, wetlands, estuaries and oceans too.
6. Government's ability, at all levels, to plan realistically and respond to emergency situations appropriately is being tested and subjected to scrutiny. Not satisfied with glib answers or spin-doctoring, the public is interrogating the reasoning and planning in a way that demonstrates deeper understanding of and engagement with issues. Can you really flush with seawater? Are 200 water points sufficient for three million people? Is saltwater intrusion into our groundwater likely? These are the sorts of questions being posed to politicians and officials who are also, happily, being swept along on a steep learning curve.
7. All the practical responses to the drought like organising a rain tank, bending the ball-valve arm down in your toilet cistern to reduce the flush volume or fitting aerators to tap nozzles have been a big boost for self-sufficiency and resilience thinking that is pollinating across other areas of life including energy, waste reduction, transport efficiency and food security. The consequent empowerment that goes with positive feedback from such efforts means a trend towards less externalisation of our needs and responsibilities and a greater sense of pride in problem solving.
8. The drought is a timely reminder of the absolute need to decouple growth from resource exploitation and environmental degradation. People's ability to halve their water consumption in a year and then do more shows what is possible. Cape Town's fossil-fuel based energy footprint is still way too high. Can that be as dramatically reduced now? Could the plastic waste stream from single-use packaging become a trickle? Is it feasible to so increase marine protected areas and compliance and change consumer behaviour so effectively that we pull back from 'day zero' on the fishing front too?
9. This kind of circular thinking has also put the spotlight on the essential need for waste water recycling. Cape Town will be joining other major cities in making this part of the new normal. The benefits are significant: less effluent to the sea, less pollution into rivers, greater water security, tighter control on commercial and industrial outflows, more training and jobs for water technicians and developing understanding of groundwater recharge implications.
10. Queues at natural springs and seeps around the city testify to, the possibly unspoken, appreciation of ecosystem services from wetlands, rivers, the ocean, springs and aquifers and the need to protect these from pollution and overuse. You can take a wash in the sea, relax in the shade of riverine vegetation and strip nutrients from your grey water with the help of a home-planted wetland. Kikuyu grass is giving way to hardy indigenous plants and local hack groups taking out

black wattle and Port Jackson are water heroes.

Before we get carried away with the idea of the drought being the best thing ever, we must note the massive increase in the sales of bottled water and the filling of pools by commercial companies, practices that promote the idea of commodifying a common good and pitch the haves against the have-nots.

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