

Making Sense of the Water Resources That Will Be Available for Future Use

Societally and environmentally important resources can be separated into five major categories: water, food, energy, human health, and ecosystem function. These resources, however, are intimately interlinked (Figure 1). Water, for example, is required for each of the other four resources. Estimating availability of water

resources, as well as other resources, requires an assessment of the threats they face. As stated by *Pielke et al.* [2009],

If communities are to become more resilient to the entire spectrum of possible environmental and social variability and change [Vörösmarty et al., 2000], scientists must properly assess the vulnerabilities and risks associated with the choices made by modern society and anticipate the demands for resources several decades into the future.

With respect to water, the world we live in has finite water resources that are under stress from rising demand due to population growth, urbanization, and industrialization [Gleick and Palaniappan, 2010]. According to a United Nations report, the current rate of growth is expected to take world population to 9 billion by the end of this century. More than 80% of this population will be residing in urban areas [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008]. A dramatic expansion in urban and industrialized areas of the world is likely. Thus, knowledge of water that can actually be harnessed for use is the key element in defining society's ability to achieve sustainable living in the 21st century.

Gaining an accurate understanding of how much water will be available for future use requires a multidimensional approach. The water that is usable can occur in various forms such as rainfall, surface water, rechargeable and fossil groundwater, snow, natural lakes, and artificial reservoirs, and through state and international treaties. There are multiple threats to these water resources through health epidemics and contamination, changes in precipitation extremes, population demand, industrial and agricultural consumption, contamination, national water policies, and climate. Lately, the consideration of

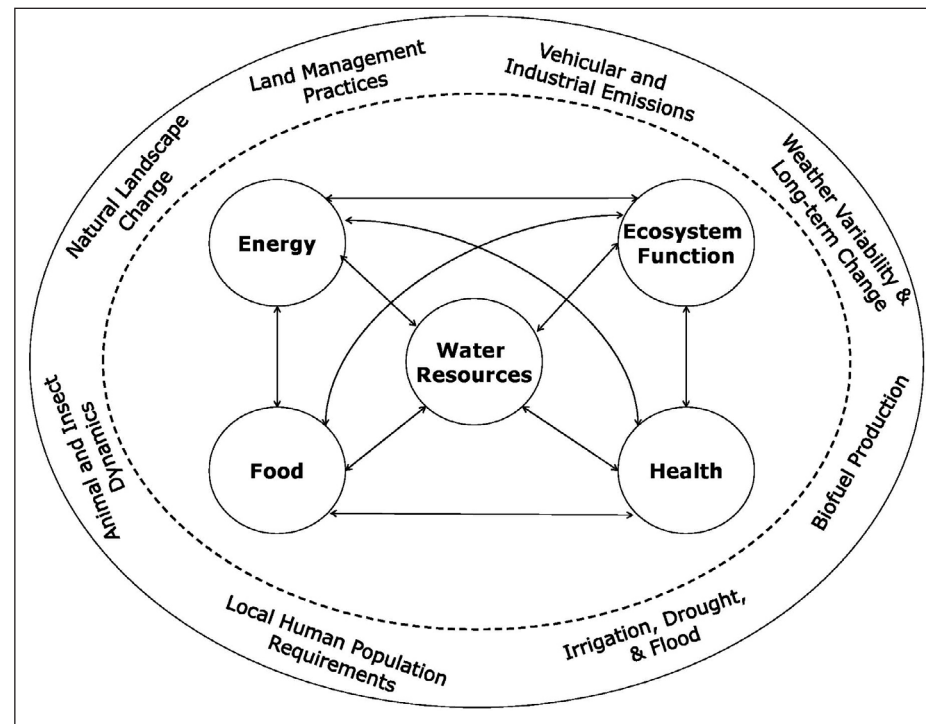


Fig. 1. The relationships among five key resources (water, food, energy, health, and ecosystem function). Outer ring shows a nonexhaustive list of stressors that affect availability or quality of the resources.

such issues (or threats) has led to the coining of the term “nexus.” A nexus can be regarded as a joint investigation addressing a few key issues, such as the “water-energy nexus,” “water-health nexus,” “water-weather nexus,” or even the “water-weather-energy nexus.” But is such a focus adequate, or should we attempt to integrate as many major threats as possible?

The resilience to known threats to water availability can be region specific and vary due to a multiplicity of factors. For example, annual flooding of about one fourth of the Ganges River delta is considered an integral part of livelihood and sustainability (by recharge of shallow aquifers and enrichment of soil with silt and nutrients [Mirza, 2003]). Yet similar levels of annual flooding in the Mississippi River delta would spell disaster possibly more catastrophic than Hurricane Katrina. Similarly, it takes about 100 liters of water to produce 1 kilowatt-hour of fossil fuel-based

electricity [Jones, 2008]. But the dependence on energy is not the same everywhere. A 15-minute power outage has a far more drastic impact on water supply in New York City than on the island of Fiji. The factors affecting availability of water in most parts of the world are many, and more than a few key issues are involved. For example, the most pressing factors affecting water availability for the vast majority in Bangladesh are arsenic contamination of shallow aquifers, impoundment of transboundary rivers by upstream nations, treatment of water and wastewater effluents, arrival times of monsoons, agricultural demand, and public health epidemics such as cholera in coastal regions [Ahmed and Karmakar, 2006; Akanda et al., 2009; Hosain and Sivakumar, 2008; Nishat and Rahman, 2010]. Almost all nations today have multiple threats to the availability of water resources, if not as many as Bangladesh [Gleick, 1998].

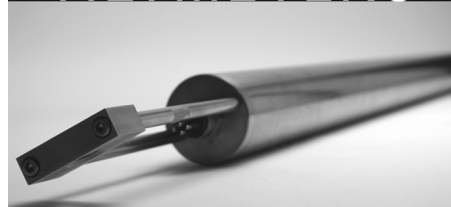
It is now important to gain a much broader view of what really affects today's water resources. To make sense of the water that we have at our disposal for future use, we need to ask ourselves the following questions:

- What are the key environmental and social variables that influence water resources?
- What is the sensitivity of these water resources to changes in each of these key variables?
- What actions (adaptation or mitigation) can be undertaken to minimize or eliminate the negative consequences of these changes (or to optimize a positive response)?

We now need a vulnerability assessment approach to evaluate the effect of environmental and societal threats to fresh water. This vulnerability concept requires the determination of the major threats to



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these resources, not only from climate but also from other social and environmental issues such as the ones described above. After these threats are identified for each resource, the relative risk from natural and human-caused climate variability and longer-term change should be compared with other risks so that the optimal mitigation or adaptation strategy can be adopted. The advantage of this vulnerability strategy, which should be location-specific, is that even if the forecast of water availability due to, say, climate or other threats were deemed to be unfounded years later, the optimal mitigation or adaptation strategy identified from multiple threats should have allowed for this margin of error during planning. In essence, such an approach guarantees a higher chance of success than would

a one-dimensional strategy such as one based on projections only from global climate models that are reported in literature [Schneider et al., 2007].

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