
Social Limitations of Sustainable Water Consumption

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When we talk about the necessity of ecologically sound behaviour we often complain about the gap between environmental consciousness and ecological behaviour. Rather than trying to improve pedagogic concepts, we should be thinking about the following central questions: is the gap between environmental consciousness and ecological behaviour an individual problem of a lack of self-discipline or is it a structural problem? Is it possibly a mental block resulting from a conflict between wishes and abilities? I would like to present my thoughts in the form of seven theses, taking our problems with water as an example.

Thesis 1: The subject "water" plays a nearly irrelevant role within people's everyday lives.

At a first glance this thesis seems to be diametrically opposed to our experiences. If the subject of saving water is mentioned either in discussions or in empirical studies, almost everyone agrees that we should be sparing in our use of this resource. However, despite this broad agreement, problems associated with water hardly play a role in people's everyday lives. When asked about environmental problems in their city that were relevant to them, the subject of water came fourth in Frankfurt and Dresden behind air pollution, traffic and rubbish, and was mentioned by only 8% of those surveyed. Water hardly gets a mention in our qualitative interviews on descriptions of everyday household life. Whether it be personal hygiene, drinking coffee with friends or colleagues, cooking, doing the washing or keeping the house clean, it is only in the rarest of cases that people are aware of the water use associated with the activity. In the organisation and implementation of the daily routine dealing with certain tasks and demands are foremost in people's minds, not the use of water.

Thesis 2: Households see only a few possibilities to reduce their internal consumption of water.

In our qualitative research some water-saving activities were mentioned comparatively frequently: lowering the amount of flushed water used in toilets,

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purchasing water-saving appliances and the well-loved example of turning-off of the tap while brushing your teeth. Although considered dramatically more difficult, first steps can also be seen in reducing water use in the areas of personal hygiene and the washing of clothes. As soon as a person's various and individual everyday routines are seriously questioned, one can expect hurdles and opposition. Much larger savings in household consumption are due to relatively recent social developments seen in the break up of traditional family structures, the increasing percentage of women with careers, the growing importance of fast food and eating outside the house, the growth in modern, experience-orientated swimming baths etc. Compared to the use of water outside the house, the internal use of water is being increasingly reduced as a result of these changes.

Thesis 3: The development of plans for water-saving consumption have failed largely for reasons of confusing or conflicting central cultural norms at the level of the individual.

Why does one group of people have to take a shower more often than another? Why do they change their outer clothing more frequently than others? Why do some others only feel comfortable in their home if it is thoroughly cleaned every day? The answers we get show ever more clearly that individual standards of cleanliness have very little to do with personal environmental consciousness, but everything to do with other, equally positively thought of norms such as being tidy, clean and well-groomed. The cultural models of cleanliness and smartness, repeated daily and demanding conformity, are the guarantees of integration in society and of social identity. Behavioural conflicts on a personal level are then the result of trying to conform to the opposing norms of cleanliness and tidiness on the one hand and of water saving on the other.

Thesis 4: A sustainable consumption of water could easily be realised if this goal is encouraged through incentives instead of punishment.

The most usual form of billing for the use of water in a household provides no incentive whatsoever for individuals to be sparing in their use of the resource. Especially in city-typical blocks of rented flats, sparing use by one occupant can be made irrelevant by the excessive use by someone else, while, simultaneously, the excessive use by that person is hardly paid for by that person themselves, as the extra costs are split up among all the occupants.

When additionally looking at the price increases imposed by the amenity bodies, which are justified as a result of lower water use by households while the fixed costs for the utility remain the same, one can see that this causes irritation at the very least.

Thesis 5: The development of ecological consciousness requires information campaigns by the mass media, but these campaigns also cause irritation because they are partly wrong, incomplete, inconsistent and can also be diametrically opposed to people's perceptions.

The image of water scarcity in people's minds originates from media representations. Parched earth and dried-up springs combined with references to southern Europe and the "Third World" are not suitable to describe our drinking-water problems, which I would like to call water scarcity among abundance. Equally spread through the media is the comprehensive knowledge of the amounts and types of pollution of surface waters and the potential dangers to flora, fauna and human health.

As a direct and personal experience of environmental damage is generally not possible, we hear from the news that a sudden reddening of the waters in the Rhine is a potential danger to our health and not an aesthetic natural spectacle. We read in the newspaper that we should not bathe in our rivers and lakes any more, or as recently, that in some cases it is now "safe" to do so once again.

Media reports on environmental problems are the essential prerequisites for building up the potential for environmental consciousness, but the conflicting expert opinions are creating growing confusion rather than a variety of viewpoints among the public at large.

It is also possible that personal experiences in a household can be in direct disagreement with generally publicised opinions in addition to the conflicts within the media itself. For the inhabitants of Frankfurt, water is almost everywhere in the environment around them, conflicting with the media images of water scarcity. Almost everyone in Frankfurt knows of their river called 'Main', the 'Nidda' and other smaller streams and lakes. Even within the built-up areas they are brought into contact with water in the form of fountains, ponds, water channels etc. The recent floods which reached as far as the historic centre of the city will still be in many people's minds.

Thesis 6: An ecological policy which aims at a sustainable consumption of water has to take note of the diverse vital social meanings of the resource within the everyday life of the people. If not, such a policy will be confronted with disapproval and resistance.

A political viewpoint which only understands water as being an essential natural resource is one which will turn out to be extremely short-sighted and problematic in the long-term. It may indeed be ecologically questionable to use valuable and scarce water of the highest quality simply to wash away human faeces, but it is just as problematic to impose water-saving regulations that completely ignore the variety of culturally orientated meanings that this

resource has for people in their everyday lives. Apart from being a vital resource, water used "carelessly" has the power to bring people pleasure, feelings of comfort and relaxation, as well as a general lust for life. Campaigns which only concentrate on the miserly use of the resource will come up against either open or hidden opposition among those targeted, as they know of the many positive experiences that they have had in their daily lives through the "careless" use of water.

Thesis 7: A new water-policy has to show pleasure-orientated perspectives as alternatives for the water-saving consumption within the household instead of enforcing and perfecting their pedagogical stingy conditioning.

Significant savings of scarce drinking water are not going to be achieved by saving water, rather through the differentiated use of water of differing qualities for different tasks. This will reduce the demand for water of the highest quality. Appeals for the saving of water must be combined with the construction of places that allow the public to "carelessly" use water. Here it would be possible to usefully combine the pleasurable experience of "wasting" water with education on the use of water that is of lower quality. This is why it is important to take on board the positive experiences that people have on holiday or in their free time, as in the very obvious developments towards a new pleasure from water as seen in the many modern swimming baths with wave makers, water chutes etc. The still sceptical individual attitudes towards water of a lower quality could be broken down and changed by taking action in this area.

The current image of hygiene and cleanliness that has worked itself into people's actions and feelings during the history of civilisation did not originate in the home, it originated in public organisations such as schools, the army or in hospitals and public baths. This process was not just a case of individuals painfully adapting to externally-dictated standards. There were certainly pleasurable elements and individual rewards through a climb in social standing. Such positive, pleasurable elements are largely missing in the current water-saving campaigns.