

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Mrs. CHGO-2
More talk about less water

27 Lugard Road,
The Peak,
Hong Kong.

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Mr. R.H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 17, N.Y.,
U.S.A.

Dear Dick,

Geoffrey has suggested that I write to tell you something about how the water shortage effects our household. Since I read recently that New York is facing a possible water shortage I thought you might be interested in learning what may be in store!

Since we are lucky enough to have running water in the house, and to live in a sparsely populated area, our water supply is three hours every fourth day. 6 a.m. - 9 a.m.. The procedure on water day is simple, in theory. Clothes washing takes place in one bathtub. In the kitchen, every available bucket, saucepan, basin, kettle, teapot, coffeepot, flask, and empty squash bottle, is filled with water. In bathrooms one bucket is filled with clean water, the ration for sponging off for four days. The children have a thorough but hurried scrubbing and hair wash in the same tub, with time for only toast for breakfast before leaving for school at 8 o'clock. The dirty bath water is kept for toilet flushing, which is our main problem, and also for washing floors. All washing thereafter is done in small plastic balers so that this water can also be added to the flushing supply after use. As one lady visitor to Hong Kong is reported to have remarked, "First you wash down as far as possible. Then you wash up as far as possible. And then you wash possible".

In Hong Kong, presumably for coolness, but also because so many people have servants, most school children wear white summer uniforms. After years of plotting to buy only those clothes which do not show the dirt and do not need ironing, this is still a deep shock to my system. I only hope I have the courage on our journey home to throw overboard our increasing collection of bleached, starched, ironed, and oh so briefly impeccable garments. However, be that as it may, during the water shortage schools have relaxed their rules about uniforms. After years of campaigning to the contrary, our headmaster was forced to pass this message on to parents, unable to suppress the bitter remark that if parents considered water could be saved by washing dirty dark clothes instead of dirty white clothes, then children need not wear uniform.

At the beginning of the summer when it was first realized how acute the crisis might be, many people, including ourselves, began to stockpile canned foods, pop, and beer. The rapid disappearance of the latter when we learned that it was unlikely we would go short of drinking water made our stockpile seem ridiculously small and our efforts rather futile had there been a more drastic shortage. But the canned vegetables particularly, help to economise on the amount of water needed to wash and cook fresh produce, and many of the childrens' feeding schemes in Hong Kong substitute bread for rice a few days each week for the same reason.

Our family water supply was augmented considerably on the occasions when rain did fall by an ingenious system Geoffrey made on the roof. We occupy the upper floor of an old house which has a variety of flat roof spaces. So by damming drains and flooding one roof area, water was channeled down to two plastic paddling pools on a lower roof from which it could be siphoned off when needed. Apart from living in fear that the "dammed" roof might collapse after any especially heavy showers, this superb feat of engineering enabled us to catch and store about 200 gallons from a shower giving less than one inch of rain. As a precaution against mosquitos breeding, one member of the family was delegated to climb and stir the water in the pools once a day.

One inconsequential result of the water shortage is that most of us become quite deranged when we hear water running, and rush to turn off taps. Geoffrey wrote to me of his horror at seeing the sprinklers working interminably when he visited California recently. Now that the hours of supply are so short, most people are out of bed and at home to make full use of the hours of water. Previously, one nightmare which beset many Hong Kong householders was to awaken or return home to find that a tap had been left on while the water supply was turned off, and when it was resumed, their apartment (and frequently the one beneath it also) was flooding rapidly. Nowadays, apart from being a minor catastrophe in itself, this kind of thing is liable to entail a heavy fine.

Despite the Water Department's noble efforts, many people, again including ourselves, experience pressure problems. So water morning, however much longed for, is a mixed blessing. As I drive home to a belated breakfast after taking our youngest to school, my hair is still damp and my mood worse. I am exhausted by the rigours of fighting the clock persuading small boys that a bath every fourth day is not an unnecessary hardship, and by the frustrations of standing with buckets poised while taps make violent unseemly noises, jerk out a few drops of rusty water, then dry up completely for ten minutes because the people downstairs are also drawing water.

So, beware, you New Yorkers and Californians!

Yours sincerely,

Brenda Oldham.

Mrs. C.H.G. Oldham.