

Water Matters-Great Lakes Watershed and That One Thing

By Matt Jones

How much water do we really have available to us, as humans, in the form of fresh water? Think about this before I numb your brain with a few statistics. Where does your water come from? Where does it go? The water you drink, cook, build under or use on the ground around your building; is there too much or not enough?

Of all the water on Earth (remember, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the surface is covered by water), there is only a portion of it that is available to us as freshwater. It breaks down this way-we'll use an imaginary pie as a device for visualizing the amounts. Most (just under 97%) of the water on Earth is salt water-we really can't use this for much of anything without extensive treatment, time, cost or energy. Of course, being salt water this particular "slice" (almost the entire pie) is not very usable.

This means that a little over 3% is freshwater. Most of the freshwater (2.4% of all water) is locked up in glaciers and snowcaps in very remote places with most of it in Antarctica. Of the remaining amount, that is divided into even smaller slices of the water pie. Now set that piece aside because it is mostly unusable. The next largest slice of freshwater (0.6% of all water) is locked up in processes such as humidity, clouds, or use in all the living organisms on Earth (remember, your body is up to 80% water). Since this slice is locked up in processes, we'll imagine that it has already been eaten. This leaves the paltry amount (0.03%) of water available to us as freshwater!!! Imagine the slice for this piece being only slightly wider than the knife you use to cut it. That's like taking a drop out of a quart of water and sharing that drop with the entire world.

Now you take that slice and divide it into five pieces. Keep in mind that you'll be sharing those five pieces with the rest of the world as you separate them. Of course this is not an equitable distribution. Of those five pieces, one of them represents the area of the Great Lakes. Another piece represents the area around Lake Baikal in the remote reaches of eastern Russia. Of those two pieces, less than 1% of the world's population lives in these areas. That's like you holding two of those pieces in a room of ninety-nine other people that have to share those other three pieces.

Being stewards of such a precious resource is a very important issue. Even if we seem to have more water than we can use it doesn't mean it should be abused. So, let's pay attention to the things we do that have a negative impact on the rivers, lakes and streams around us (this includes those we sometimes call "ditches," too!). This means pay attention to the directions of your fertilizers and such. Clean up after your pets and livestock and be sure their waste doesn't wash into your local waterway. Most likely, that waterway is a part of someone's drinking water-it could be yours.

As a quick reminder of the importance of the water around you, think of those five pieces of that very skinny slice of the freshwater "pie;" now look at the fingers and thumb of one of your hands. Hold up one of those fingers and imagine that as that one piece of that slice. This one is yours-protect and use it wisely. It's the one thing that makes this area unique.