

Tucson Citizen

Kimble: Rethinking water – and toilets

Water worth its waste, um, weight in gold

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Yes, I know you may be getting ready for dinner, and I'm sorry, but this is something we need to discuss: an invention we consider one of the hallmarks of a civilized society.

When we go to the bathroom (sorry), all we do is push a lever and a satisfying and powerful whoosh takes it all away.

Then it becomes someone else's problem - in our case, Pima County's. It's gone, and that's all that matters.

Robert Glennon knows this won't make him tremendously popular, but he says we need to rethink how we dispose of human waste.

It's one of many things we need to rethink when it comes to water, says Glennon, a law professor at the University of Arizona and author of a new book, "Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What to Do About It."

Although we take it for granted, Glennon points out that he isn't the first person to point out that the way we handle human waste is wasteful.

More than 100 years ago, Teddy Roosevelt asked whether "civilized people ought to know how to dispose of the sewage in some other way than putting it into the drinking water."

Looked at that way, it does seem rather silly.

As Glennon notes, we go to great lengths to ensure the water delivered to our homes is absolutely pure and ready to drink. Then we take a bunch of that pure, ready-to-drink water, dump you-know-what in it, and send it away.

"It is a bizarre system," he said in an interview this week. "We take a resource, treat it to drinking water standards, then use only 10 percent for drinking."

In his book, Glennon has plenty of examples of profligate water use.

There is the theme park outside Atlanta where in 2007, after a drought hit the South, a 400-foot tubing hill and 13,000-square-foot play area were opened - both covered in man-made snow. After nonessential water use was banned, the theme park owners claimed snow-making was essential. They later relented and shut down the snow-making - after using 1.2 million gallons of water.

There are lavish magazine articles about opulent bathrooms in Phoenix homes where a designer bragged about catering to clients who demand "car wash" sprays in their showers. There are 10-head showers, each spewing 7.5 gallons per minute. So a 10-minute shower uses 750 gallons of water.

There have been many plans and schemes - some downright wacko - to get more water to where it is needed.

Cloud seeding to make it rain more. Desalinate seawater. Filling ocean-going tankers with water and shipping it where needed. Put 13 million gallons of water in a massive polyfiber bag and use tugboats to tow the bags from Alaska to San Diego. Pipelines crossing the Rockies.

All the ideas are enormously expensive and face huge environmental and political obstacles. It certainly would be far simpler to just save more of the water we have than use it to dispose of human waste and have car wash shower sprays.

We don't value water because we pay so little for it. Glennon notes that we pay more for cell phone or cable television service - neither of which is essential.

The average American family pays about one-quarter cent per gallon for its water - which works out to about \$20 per month.

"But we're not paying for the cost of the water," Glennon said. "We're only paying for the cost of getting it to us."

So what can and should be done to persuade people to value the water they have?

Tucson already is ahead of most communities, Glennon said, with the use of reclaimed water on golf courses and parks and a rate structure in which the cost of each block of water is higher than the previous one - a system that penalizes high-volume users.

One-third of American communities have declining block rates - the more water you use, the cheaper it gets - which encourages profligate water use, Glennon said.

And unbelievably, an unknown number of communities don't even have water meters. Customers pay a flat monthly rate regardless of usage.

Residents of Sacramento, Calif., for example, have no water meters and recently voted to keep it that way.

Glennon said, "We have treated water as though it is infinite and valueless, while it is really finite and valuable."

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

ABOUT THE BOOK

"Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What to Do About It" by Robert
Glennon

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400 pages, \$27.95