

Water – the key to life

Australia has recently seen the worst floods for 30 years and droughts worldwide are also becoming more common and severe. Many experts believe that these extreme weather conditions will continue or get worse. Too much or too little water are both problematic, but water is the key to life.

Why is water so important? You can live for weeks without food, but only a few days without water. Since 1950 the number of people in the world has doubled and water use has increased by six times, but the amount of water in the world remains the same. All the water in the world is about a billion years old. The water becomes ice or seawater or rain, but there is no new water.

In many parts of the world there is very little water and people struggle to get enough for their daily needs. They often walk to the nearest water source, which sometimes means carrying up to 30 kilos of water on their backs for more than a kilometre in temperatures of up to 40 degrees, just to have enough water for one day.

In other places there is no nearby water source. In the deserts of Africa, Samburu herders depend on elephants to lead them to water as elephants are very good at finding underground water. The Tubu tribe in Niger cross the desert to sell and buy at the nearest market, which takes them eight days. There is only one well on the way and nothing but sand dunes in temperatures around 45 degrees. Mothers teach their daughters how to find the well from the shape of the large dunes and the stars at night.

The driest place on earth is the Atacama desert in Chile. Some parts of this desert have not had any rain for more than 400 years. Fortunately, the wind from the Pacific brings fog to the desert and this turns to water on plants like cacti. This gave local people the idea of using huge nets to catch the fog in the same way that the plants do. When the fog hits the net it turns to water, which can be collected in pipes.

Although there are local solutions, over one billion people worldwide do not have access to safe drinking water. For this reason, the United Nations plan to halve the number of people without access to safe drinking water as one of the Millennium Development Goals for 2015 and they are fully expecting to achieve this goal.

1 Before reading the text, think about why water is so important for life and why experts are saying that water is the key resource of the 21st century. Think about:

- dry areas of the world
- changes in the way people live
- changes in the weather worldwide
- changes in the way we use water

2 Which paragraph in the text (1–6) talks about each of the following?

- 1 How plants helped people to collect water. _____
- 2 Using animals or the shape of the sand dunes and stars to find water. _____
- 3 Plans for reducing the number of people without clean water to drink worldwide. _____
- 4 Changes in world weather patterns. _____
- 5 Changes in the amount of water we use. _____
- 6 A typical way of finding water. _____

3 Here are some numbers from the article. Match them with the correct information. Then read the article quickly to check your answers.

1 billion	1950	45	400	2015	30	6	1
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- 1 The number of people in the world has doubled since _____ .
- 2 Water use has increased by _____ times in about the last 60 years.
- 3 All the water in the world is _____ years old.
- 4 Some people carry up to _____ kilos of water on their backs.
- 5 Temperatures can reach _____ degrees in the desert in Niger.
- 6 There is only _____ well on an 8-day trip to market in Niger.
- 7 Some parts of the desert in Chile have not had rain for _____ years.
- 8 The UN expects to reduce the number of people without drinking water by _____ .

4 In pairs, make as many questions as you can about the text. Then ask another pair to answer them, without looking.

5 Many words in English can have the same sound but a different spelling. In the list of words below find the **one** word with a **different** pronunciation of the underlined vowel.

- 1 herders / world / earth / year / worse / turns / worst
- 2 more / water / old / also / daughters / important / source / fortunately

6 Discuss these questions with your partner(s).

- How has the weather changed in your country?
- Does your country suffer from droughts or floods?
- What are people doing to reduce water use in your country?
- What do you do to reduce how much water you use?

Glossary

flood (*noun*) - a large amount of water that covers an area that was dry before

drought (*noun*) - a long period of time when there is little or no rain

severe (*adj*) - serious and worrying

key (*noun*) - the thing that will do most to help you to achieve something: proper planning is the key to success

source (*noun*) - a person, place, or thing that provides something that you need or want

herder (*noun*) - someone who herds and looks after a group of animals as their job

tribe (*noun*) - a large group of related families who live in the same area and share a common language, religion, and customs

well (*noun*) - a deep hole that is dug in the ground to provide a supply of water

dune (*noun*) - a hill of sand on a beach or in a desert

net (*noun*) - material made of string or rope woven into a loose pattern with spaces in it, or a piece of this

access (*noun*) - the right or opportunity to have or use something that will bring you benefits

goal (*noun*) - something that you hope to achieve

The **Millennium Development Goals** are United Nation plans to fight against global problems like poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women. They have set specific goals to achieve in these areas by 2015.