

The News

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Where has all our water gone

By Nancy Whelan -- "Williwaws"

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On our island lighthouse, a rainy day like this meant lots of gurgling from the basement as rainwater poured into the cisterns.

With the exception of the chicken house, every roof on the station led rain to storage areas for our every use. Only the water falling on rocky shores found its way immediately into the sea.

In our towns and villages, how much of the falling rain is stored - naturally or by man - for future use? As some communities are finding out, not nearly enough. The remaining rain is either not sufficient for our dry seasons' prodigal use, or in its abundance, it is wandering into homes and businesses where it is not wanted. Why should this be, especially here on our wet coast or rainforest areas?

On the first weekend of November, in Qualicum Beach, a conference sponsored by the members of the Oceanside Coalition for Strong Communities, Our Water - Our Future, gave us many of the answers.

In the early days of our planet, all the systems were in place to ensure that rain could form and fall regularly, and when it fell in quantity there were natural storage containers to hold it in reserve. These containers were plants, mosses, trees, bogs, marshes, wetlands and the very soil itself. Besides storing the water, the ground acted as a natural filter (eat your heart out, Brita) to gradually absorb, clear, and purify the water before it found its way to underground aquifers, streams, and rivers. Of course it eventually found its way to the sea to contribute its quota of salt, but stop to think of its leisurely paths.

The earth was covered with trees and plants where the rainwater spent lengthy sojourns; it was in no hurry; it percolated bit by bit through forest duff, sand, and gravel. Like all early travel, the rainwater's journeys took time; you might say it was slow water.

Now fast forward to the present and we begin, I hope, to see a different picture, a picture with big problems. Like everything else today, the rainwater doesn't know the meaning of slow or moderation. It's hurry, hurry, hurry, and when a big crowd of raindrops get together, it's "Let's party and trash this place!" Then, when we would welcome the rainwater to refresh our fevered brows, it's nowhere to be found - it's run away to sea. Some interesting facts came out of the weekend's conference. How about, "Prior to Europeans arriving [in North America] only about 20 per cent of the precipitation would run off immediately. The other 80 per cent would hang around - and be released slowly through what you might call ground transmission during the dry months. Unless we find ways to hold back this tremendous amount of water it just wants to get down the hills and out to the ocean as fast as it can - much more than 20 per cent now runs off immediately."

Now the problem picture begins to form. Instead of big trees sheltering the soil, breaking the impact of heavy rain on the ground, and storing huge amounts of water, we have barren or paltry-growthed, steep hillsides luring the rainwater on to a roller coaster ride to the sea. Billions of roofs lead their water to downspouts, to storm sewers, to streams or rivers to the sea - another thrilling ride for the rainwater with less water for things and people that need it. Roads, parking

lots, industrial sites covered with concrete or pavement - no permeable surfaces for the raindrops to wander through, but, "Ah, - to the ditches - that's where we'll get a joyride," and too often the travellers are full of toxins picked up along the way.

Don't ask where the water's gone. It's gone - for us. Our Water - Our Future was an eye-opener, or at least a wake-up call, demanding we stop our own headlong rush to oblivion, and take time to pay attention to this source of all life. Much of what we learned we knew, but keeping that knowledge in mind, making the connections, preventing disasters or at best inconveniences in the making, giving water the honour and respect it deserves, that's what the conference was all about.

The first speaker, Kim Recalma-Clutesi, spoke of her culture's rituals with respect to water, and I paraphrase her words: We need rituals to help us remember the importance of water, the interconnectedness of water with all forms of life - globally.

The very ritual of saying a silent thank you each time we see the water gush from the tap might slow down its rush to the sea. And there are practical ways even you and I can help - stay tuned.

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