

# ICEBERGS IN THE THAMES

Shooting down the top ten myths about water shortages.

## TEST YOURSELF

Recently there's been so much advice in the media about how to save water that Source has got confused. Can you help us un-jumble our mixed up messages to reveal some top water saving tips?

- Wash your fruit and veg in a bowl instead of flushing them down the toilet.
- Always use a bucket instead of a hosepipe to wash your teeth.
- Soak the roots of your plants a few times a week using a dual flush toilet.
- Put cotton wool buds and the like in the rubbish bin instead of washing them under the tap.
- Don't run your water butt for the sake of just a couple of t-shirts or a few dinner plates.
- Never leave the tap running while washing the car.
- Have a shower in the evening using a watering can filled with 'grey' water.
- Fit a washing machine or dishwasher in your garden to collect rainwater.
- Use mulch in your toilet cistern to save water with every flush.
- Water the garden instead of having a bath.
- Put a 'hippo' on your flowerbeds to keep the soil moist and cool and keep away water-sapping weeds (a brick works just as well).
- Save water by giving your toilet a good flush a few times a week instead of lightly watering it every day.

### MYTH NO. 1

**Britain is so rainy, there should be plenty of water for everyone.**

This myth deserves to be the first to be shot down, not least because the belief that water is plentiful makes it harder to persuade people to use less. In fact, the UK has less water per person than any other European country apart from Belgium and Cyprus. To make matters worse, we use more water per person than almost any other European country – an average of 150 litres per day.

Worse still, some of the driest parts of the country also have the most people and the fewest reservoirs. Areas such as London rely heavily on piping underground water to the surface.

All this has been highlighted by this summer's drought in the Southeast, which has seen the introduction of hosepipe bans for the first time since the long hot summer of 1976. Two consecutive winters of below average rainfall have caused water reserves to plummet and some areas have endured the driest period since 1921. Certain rivers, such as the River Pang in Berkshire, are beginning to run dry.

### Myth No. 2

**This is a Southern problem – here in the Northwest we don't need to bother saving water.**

It's true that rainfall varies significantly across the country – broadly speaking the North gets about 50 per cent more than the South – and the current drought in the Southeast may seem a long way from the Northwest. But it's only three years since we faced similar problems. In the summer of 2003 a drought order was in place and the threat of hosepipe bans hung in the air. Villages that were long ago flooded to create our normally well-stocked reservoirs were rising once more from the receding waters.

So there's no room for complacency. It's worth noting also that climate change experts are predicting hotter, drier summers, which will increase the likelihood of water shortages. Another drought is just a matter of time.

### Myth No. 3

**A national water grid would solve the problem once and for all.**

Proposals for a national water grid have been around since at least the 1970s and by some reckonings since the Second World War. They received a boost this summer when the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) said the government should consider the concept.

Like all the best myths, at first glance it seems to make perfect sense – the idea is to pipe water from the wet parts of the country, most likely mid-Wales, to the drier South and Southeast. What could be easier?

Well, first of all even the engineers at ICE say that a national water grid would take at least 20 years to build. And it would be so expensive that no one yet seems to have come up with even an estimate for the cost. On top of that, water is very heavy, so moving it around the grid would require a lot of energy – right at a time when we're supposed to be cutting energy usage to reduce greenhouse gases, which cause climate change, which leads to...droughts. If that's not enough, there are concerns that the scheme could cause the River Severn to dry up.

### Myth No. 4

**Britain is surrounded by sea, so desalination plants can supply all the water we need.**

This myth joins the national water grid in the 'sensible until you actually think about it' pile.

Existing desalination plants are expensive to build and use large amounts of energy to produce drinkable water. In London, Ken Livingstone has blocked proposals for a desalination plant over concerns about the energy demands. And the need for lots of energy also makes desalinated water expensive.

New technologies are on the horizon that might make desalination cheaper and less energy intensive, but according to water efficiency experts at Waterwise, it's unlikely that desalination has much of a future in the UK.

### Myth No. 5

**We shouldn't have to save water when leaky pipes waste so much of it.**

It's hard to defend leaky pipes, at least at first sight. Around 27 per cent of the water supply simply leaks away, and in some parts of London the figure is closer to 40 per cent. But this isn't unusual – compared to rates of leakage in other European countries, England actually does quite well.

Consider also that the water system we use was largely built by the Victorians. It's given years of sterling service, but not surprisingly, it needs constant repair.

The water companies are in fact investing hundreds of millions of pounds in replacing miles of aging pipes around the country, including here in the Northwest, and leakage has been cut. A more strategic, less 'find and fix' approach would help, but ultimately it all comes down to money – the cost of replacing all the leaky pipes would be astronomical. At a certain point the costs outweigh the benefits and the money is better spent in other ways.

### Myth No. 6

**Water just falls from the sky so it's completely environmentally friendly.**

Odd as it may seem, turn on your tap and you're contributing to global warming. That's because it takes a lot of energy to purify rainwater into the half tonne of drinking water the average home uses every day and even more to treat the half tonne of sewage produced by the average home each day.

The water industry uses about three per cent of the UK's energy. So saving water helps reduce energy use and therefore climate change.

In addition, areas like the Northwest have natural ecosystems that rely on surface water, so any water we take out for human use has an impact on the natural environment.

### Myth No. 7

**We'll all be forced to use water meters, which will end up costing us more.**

Why the panic over metering? Most of Europe is fully metered and in fact around 25 per cent of homes in the UK already have meters. All new houses have them. We are comfortable with the idea of paying for the electricity and gas that we actually use, so why not water?

The important point is that meters make people aware of the water they are using and so encourage them to use less – usually around 10 per cent less. And contrary to popular wisdom, meters tend not to lead to higher bills. Estimates suggest that around 70 per cent of customers pay either less or the same when switching to a meter. However, if the use of meters increases there will need to be special protection for people on low incomes.

### Myth No. 8

**The more water they sell, the more money the water companies make.**

The water industry is highly regulated and doesn't operate like a normal market. The price of water is fixed by Ofwat, the government's regulator, and can't be put up by the water companies. At the same time, they have a legal obligation to supply all the water people demand. If water becomes more expensive to produce or demand goes up, the water companies are out of pocket. So ironically, the water companies are actually encouraging people to use less water.

### Myth No. 9

**So...saving water only helps the water companies. There's nothing in it for me.**

There is more to saving water than the warm glow of good citizenship and the comforting knowledge that you are doing your bit to save the planet. You could consider reducing the amount of water you use and having a water meter installed. Take advice from your water company, and you could end up saving money.

### Myth No. 10

**Ships can tow icebergs south from the Arctic to provide huge amounts of cheap water.**

Icebergs drifting past the Houses of Parliament? It would doubtless be a spectacular sight, but not one we're ever likely to see, even though the idea seems to have been around for years. Maybe one day...

#### MORE INFORMATION:

[www.waterwise.org.uk](http://www.waterwise.org.uk)  
[www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk)  
[www.unitedutilities.com](http://www.unitedutilities.com)