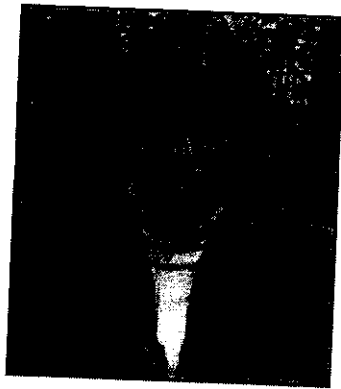


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Water, Water Everywhere and Not a Drop to Drink - Could it Happen Here? Hopefully Not

By *Jacqueline Herships*



Builders know that managing water is complex, challenging, essential to the success of their projects, essential to our well-being. But as a society, are we still in La La land, just beginning to realize that there could be a time when in spite of all our technical wizardry the well might run dry? Maybe there isn't a magic tap in the sky waiting at our beck and call, ready to gush. Anthony Sblendorio, a landscape architect specializing in regenerative design, and lead site designer for the ecology-centered, award-winning Willow School in Bedminster, N.J., knows that water is precious - not to be wasted, not to be mistreated, and not to be used up. In this spirit, Back to Nature, the ecological design and development company he founded in the early 1990s, incorporates stewardship into its plans. We don't own the resources we are given, they believe, we borrow them. In the case of water, Mr. Sblendorio, a US Green Building Council (USGBC-NJ) board member, says he demands that his projects return water in better condition than it was in when they received it.

But stewardship is a concept which hasn't meshed well with profit-making in the past, our attitude being 'possession is nine tenths of the law'. Only now when our generation is facing a rocks are hard water is wet situation, no pun intended, is it possible that we may be forced to react to the signs that things need to change. No water, no profit.

A recent New York Times review of Elizabeth Royte's book, "Bottlemania, How Water Went on Sale and Why We Bought It", quotes the author as saying, "The coming scarcity will hurt the growth of jobs, housing and businesses. Water experts predict shortages will pit communities and states against each other, states' rights against national interests, the rich against the poor, cities against villages, corporations against individuals, and humans against other creatures that compete with us for water."

Forced to pay attention by periodic draughts, by the ever more present discussion of global warming and climatic change, and by the inherent problems and rising costs of traditional water treatment technologies, our leaders are starting to think about the implications of continuing as we are - many kicking and screaming along the way...but thinking about it nonetheless. The problem is that stewardship not only requires us to change the way we think, but to reconfigure our infrastructures towards sustainable design as well ... a tall order.

In the case of water, a shape shifting substance which comes and goes in the alternating forms of liquid, steam, vapor, and ice, stewardship also requires that attention be paid to the land which holds the water, to the air through which it travels, to the plants and animals and to ourselves, who drink it, bathe in it and use it in thousands of other

ways - and particularly to our prideful assumption that water is and will always be there for our use and pleasure. According to Ms. Royte, Arizona is already importing everything it drinks. Well, maybe not in the mountains I was told during another conversation. But their situation gives one pause.

Back to Nature regards education as key, Mr. Sblendorio says. The company has an environmental as well as an aesthetic focus for both its landscape business and its newer venture, Ecological Development, which works to create ecological residential, commercial, and municipal property design.

"We use the regenerative approach to assess every piece of land we work with," he said. "This allows us to see opportunities where others see challenges. When we encounter a wetland, instead of viewing it as a liability, we view it as an asset that can be both beautiful and functional by increasing the ground water recharge, wildlife habitat, and character of a site. When a property we're developing is bisected by a river unable to support aquatic life, we repair the land that borders the river and the systems that feed into it so that the river may once again provide a home to fish and other wildlife.

However, to reach the masses of builders and homebuyers who are happy with a "chop down the trees, plunk down the houses, dump the leftovers" approach - a broader acceptance of regenerative, sustainable methods must be developed. Adults and especially children need to be reconnected with nature and natural systems. This is different than preaching green building, he said, noting that on a practical basis, when people understand relationships with the natural world they are better clients. (They are also more likely to support leaders who promote change in the direction of sustainability). But, to get there, said Mr. Sblendorio, they have to be led to understand the value in creating a pond, habitat, and local food. People need to understand that apples come from trees and not the super market.

These are laudable goals and they make a lot of sense. But the numbers of specifics that need to be modified with green oriented technology and / or addressed with education, are mind-boggling. John Zoubek holds two engineering degrees and an MBA and has served as President of two major national construction equipment and supply trade associations. After selling Zoubek Associates, Inc., a leading 40-year-old distributor of construction equipment and supplies in the New York-New Jersey metropolitan area, Mr. Zoubek joined Newark-based Clearwater Technology clearwatertechnology.com - where he recently became a Principal. Clearwater offers niche specific compliance solutions for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 1999 Phase II Stormwater Regulations. Many of these highly focused systems involve the use of what he calls 'microbes' - naturally occurring microorganisms such as yeast, fungi, or bacteria, and include bioremediation for vehicle washing and control of hydrocarbons in wastewater streams. Clearwater also works with marinas on the Jersey Shore and along the Delaware River, which are no longer allowed to discharge oily, dirty water after washing their boats. Essentially, he explained, the microbes eat the fats, oils and greases or hydrocarbons (e.g. benzene, naphtha solvents, motor oil, greases, brake cleaners etc.) removed by water during washing. The byproducts are carbon dioxide and water. "We get rid of the hydrocarbons," Mr. Zoubek said. "We're not moving them somewhere else, we're consuming them. And we're not leaving our clients with filters contaminated with hydrocarbons that have to be disposed of. The filters have no oil on them, so they can be reused for a long time."

The details of remediation go on and on as in the case of another area of the Phase II regs that Clearwater addresses - the floatables and solids which leave construction sites, landfills, quarries etc. as rainwater runoff, or which are driven out as "trackout" on the wheels of trucks. Any site over an acre or an impervious surface over 1/4 of an acre falls under the Phase II Storm Water Regs.

The challenge for remediation is getting to that level of specificity where the rubber hits the road, so to speak...to the runoff, the trucks, and boats and to those guilty of 'trackout'. To do so, Mr. Zoubek targets municipality public works operations, construction equipment dealers and contractors, highway departments, auto and truck dealers, recycling centers, landfills, solid waste haulers, airports, military bases, golf courses and colleges & universities. It's an arduous process. Not only because each potential client has to be targeted individually, but because we are in an era of ever-tightening budgets. Hopefully things will be made easier by a shifting of priorities as the general public begins to understand the ramifications of pollution. Because according to Mr. Zoubek, most of the pollution that gets into the rivers, lakes and ocean comes from storm water runoff.

According to Anthony Sblendorio, we have been learning to pay attention. In the late 60's early 70's, for example, environmentalists saw that wetlands act as the kidneys of our planet, and today we have protective legislation in place. But we have to fight every inch of the way to maintain it, he said. "The policies that govern land use are set up

to prevent continued damage to the environment which is extremely important," he noted. "The challenge is that there's not a path to look at a regenerative solution. If we continue to say that nature is on one side of the fence...and we're on the other, we won't change the ways we go about things. If we don't change our habits we haven't done much - solely protecting natural resources isn't enough. We need a process that stimulates creativity so we can not only preserve the natural resources we have left but contribute to creating new ones.

And so Mr. Sblendorio works to influence leadership at the municipal level - Mr. Zoubek works at the more granular public works, individual business level - both are leaders in creating environmentally and economically viable solutions. Relentlessly going in - making presentations - demonstrating how to manage and create different designs - trying to help them green up their own operations. Hoping that if municipalities and public works departments and all those others move forward, land owners and builders will follow suit.

1- The New York Times book review "Distilled From Water; Designer or Tap: High Anxiety", Pg. E33, July 18, 2008. Bottlemania, How Water Went on Sale and Why We Bought It, by Elizabeth Royte

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