

Daily Use of Water in Kenya

Our daily usage of water is extremely low compared with use in the United States. We have no running water and no flushing toilet, so we conserve quite a bit of water. In the morning, we brush our teeth using one cup of water, wash our faces with about two cups of water (we both use the same water), and are off to school. At school there also is no running water. Tea is served at 11 a.m., then we are home for lunch. We drink water (or Kool-Aid) with lunch, then return to teach. At night we cook with water (boiling noodles, rice, etc.) as well as boil water for bathing. We take the boiling water and add cold water until it is nice and warm, then splash-bathe using three gallons of water each. We collect the bath water and kitchen water in buckets to use it for watering our garden, so we reuse as much as possible.

Our community is much like us in terms of water usage. Our neighbors may go to the river to bathe or wash clothes. Water is scarce and it is safer to drink soda or tea rather than the river water. Everyone relies on rainwater for watering crops, and only the rich can afford to collect and store rainwater for personal use.

*By Drew Denzi
Ololulunga, Kenya*

The first thing I do when I wake up is to check whether or not I have running water. If I do, I fill my three-liter kettle and put it on my kerosene stove to boil drinking water for the day. And, if I have water I can shower. Otherwise I use water from my 100-liter barrel, taking three liters to boil and about five liters to "splash bathe." I pour the five liters into a basin, wet myself down, soap myself up, and rinse myself off. The key is to avoid getting soap in the water, otherwise you're stuck with soap in your eyes, trying to get water out of the barrel without getting soap into it and polluting your only source of water (until the water comes back on). A very delicate operation, especially if you can't open your eyes.

I use water for many of the same things I did in the United States (drinking, bathing, washing clothes and dishes, and cleaning my house). The difference is that I use about one-fifth of the water for each of these tasks as I did in the States. For example, I can hand-wash a load of clothes with about 10 liters of water, quite a bit less than my washing machine at home would use. There are days though, when I have sores on my knuckles from hand-scrubbing clothes, that I still miss the washing machine.

*By Patrick Campbell
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The rising sun wakes me at 6:30 a.m., and I walk drowsy-eyed into the kitchen. I find a large pot on top of the gas stove and congratulate myself for remembering to boil water last night for drinking today. I toss this water into the filter and put about two liters more on the stove to heat for bathing. I also put a small kettle on to boil water for my morning cup of coffee.

Noticing that both of my 50-liter water-storage containers are quite low, I check the backyard tap to see if by chance any water is trickling into the 20-liter plastic "jerry can" I can usually leave underneath the spigot. No luck. Today is Friday; tap water has not come in a week. Even worse, rains have been scarce. I guess my mountain of dirty clothes will just have to remain one more day, since it will take at least 20 liters to wash them by hand. What little water I have must be saved for drinking and bathing. But the distant clouds in the east give me hope that the rains might come this afternoon. If not, I'll have to pay a mama to go to the river for me tomorrow.

I remember the day I tried to fetch water for myself from the river and I laugh. That is exactly what the mamas did, too, when they saw me struggling miserably to carry a full jerry can of water home. One mama offered to carry it for me, and I couldn't refuse. She lifted it up to her head as if the thing were empty and balanced it so effortlessly! Since that day I have preferred to ask these mamas for help, having realized that it's probably not best to spend all day killing myself trying to accomplish what they can do in 10 minutes.

After bathing and eating breakfast, I head off to work. My only scheduled appointment today is an hour's walk away with a farmer named Joseph. Joseph started a small tree nursery recently so that he could plant some trees on his hillside farm to prevent soil erosion during the heavy rainy season. Already erosion has swept away most of his nutrient-rich topsoil, resulting in a harvest insufficient for Joseph to feed his own family. I had instructed him earlier on how to construct the seedbed, and I had even given him some seeds of indigenous trees. Unfortunately, I arrive today to find that all the seedlings are dried up and dead. Joseph has made the single most common mistake among the farmers I work with—he has failed to water the seedlings every morning and evening. "The river is so far," he complains to me, sounding very discouraged. I suggest that he move the nursery closer to a reliable water source, or share the nursery with another interested farmer who lives near the river. Delighted by my idea, he decides to try again. We agree to meet again in a few weeks' time.

On my way home I meet Brenda, the seven-year-old daughter of my friend Zibborah. Brenda is carrying a bucket of water from a local spring, and she looks very tired. No wonder! The very steep path between the spring and her house is severely eroded and difficult to navigate—especially while balancing a bucket of water on her head, I imagine. Brenda explains that this is her sixth trip to the spring today, because Fridays are clothes-washing days.

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I follow Brenda home to greet Zibborah, who seems very happy to see me. She claims she is fine but then complains about the lack of rain and how it is ruining her maize crop. Instinctively we both look to the eastern skies and agree the rains will come today.

Zibborah graciously invites me in for lunch. Before eating she brings a pitcher of warm water, a basin, and some soap, and she pours the water over my hands as I wash them—a Kenyan ritual before and after every meal. After lunch she offers me some drinking water. Refusing politely, I explain that I have carried my own boiled water so that I do not get sick. Zibborah is not offended, and we discuss at length the importance of clean drinking water. After hearing my opinions, she decides that from now on she will be boiling her water to protect her family from waterborne diseases.

The darkening sky and cool winds cue me that it is time to make my departure. If the rain comes while I am here, I'll be stuck until nighttime! I continue my trek home with a bounce in my step, silently thanking the forces that are responsible for bringing us the coming storm. Finally my clothes will be clean! I assumed the farmers are just as grateful as I, for the thirst of their crops, their only sustenance, will be quenched today. I ponder the necessity of rain for survival here in Kenya. Never before has rain played such a direct role in my own survival. This realization hits me just as the first large, cool drops begin pelting my arms and face.

I reach my front door just as the downpour begins. Once inside, I grab all my basins, pots, jerry cans, and other containers. I take them outside and place them in strategic spots under the roof where rainwater falls plentifully—I need to collect as much water as possible. Finally, I sit by the window to rest and watch the storm cool off the scorching land. I make a quick mental note: remember to boil water again tonight for drinking tomorrow.

*By Barbara Hinsman
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