What do you do if you want a drink of water? What about if you need clean water to wash the dishes or take a shower? A lot of people just turn on the faucet and water flows out. However, in some areas of the world, that isn’t possible. That’s because access to fresh water, one of the world’s most important natural resources, has become hard to find. Even though more than 70 percent of the Earth is made up of water, less than 3 percent of that water is fresh water.

**Where Has All the Water Gone?**

According to the United Nations, one fifth of the world’s population lives in areas where fresh water cannot regularly be found. Another quarter of the world’s population live in areas where fresh water can only be accessed by those with money. As the world’s supply of fresh water continues to dwindle, the number of people without access to fresh water will rise.

The population of Earth continues to grow. In 1800, there were 1 billion people on the planet. Today, there are around 7 billion. The more people there are, the more fresh water we need. In drier areas of the world, such as the western United States, people also have to use more water to help grow crops. This takes away from the water available for people. Weather conditions, such as low rainfall totals and droughts, can also take away from the available water supply, making it harder for people to get what they need.

When cities face a water crisis, typically the demand for water exceeds the supply. This means people are using more water than the city’s supplies can support. The more new houses, businesses, and people who move into an area, the more water the area needs. To keep the water from running out, people either have to use less water or they have to find another way to get water. A few ways to fix this type of water problem include:

- Restricting water use
- Encouraging people to conserve water
- Digging new wells

Fresh water comes from sources such as lakes, streams, and rivers.
The Dwindling Water Supply

- Building new reservoirs
- Buying water from another area
- Cutting back on new homes and businesses

Controlling Access to Water

Sometimes people have physical access to fresh water, but that water has become unsafe to use. In countries such as the United States, fresh water is taken directly from the source and cleaned in a plant before it comes out of the faucet. However, many smaller countries do not have these systems in place. As a result, much of the water has become full of toxins and pathogens.

In many areas of the world, people face both problems. Not only do they have very few fresh water sources, those sources that exist have been contaminated. Getting access to the water and cleaning it requires money. Therefore, in areas of the world where many people live on less than $2 a day, only the wealthy have access to clean water. In some of these areas, the government also controls the fresh water supply, recognizing that selling water is an easy way to make a lot of money.

Getting access to fresh water in areas where the supply is limited or controlled by others can be tricky. Fixing the problem requires teaching people about the importance of clean water. It may also involve changing some of the governments so that everyone, not just people with money, has access to the fresh water supply. Non-profit organizations such as Water Missions International work with people in many countries in Africa to help teach people about the importance of clean water. They also provide people with the knowledge and equipment to help them find fresh water, build wells, and keep the water that they can access clean.

Tapping into Another Natural Resource

Because oceans cover more than 71 percent of Earth, it may be hard to believe that water could really be in short supply. However, there’s one major difference between ocean water and fresh water—ocean water is filled with salt. To help provide more fresh water for Earth, some experts have suggested desalinating, or removing the salt, from ocean water. However, building pipes to get the water from the ocean and plants to remove the salt from the water would cost a lot of money.
Changing the salt content of the ocean could also kill many of the fish and plants that depend on the salt in the ocean to live.

There’s no easy way to fix the water crisis, but letting people know it’s coming is a good start. Next time you turn on the faucet and water comes out, remember that not everyone has access to fresh water. This will remind you not to take water for granted and only use the water that you need.

**Comprehension Questions:**

1. What are some causes of a water shortage?
2. What are some ways to help people get access to water?
3. How can individuals help fix the water crisis?