

# Virtual Water: Tackling the Threat to Our Planet's Most Precious Resource

Author: Tony Allan

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This is a small book with a huge story. It is a book of a simple language in which complex and important thoughts are made clear. It is a very serious book which uses both wit and humour throughout. It is above all a book drawn from research and scientific discovery – and yet the insights are always accessible, intelligible and except for the lively annexes, largely devoid of graphs and formulas. Tony Allan makes water issues understandable: “Think of one cubic metre of water as three bathtubs” (he doesn’t say if these are the nice big English tubs.....).

Prof. Tony Allan is uniquely qualified to guide both the informed reader and the recent initiate through the vexations of water management. A long time author, researcher, educator, counsellor and advisor to many, he won the 2008 Stockholm Water Prize for his pioneering work on Virtual Water.

Once we understand this *virtual water concept* we can start to understand how much water we each actually use each day, each week, each month. This is hidden water; this is the indispensable ingredient in the food, clothing, energy and consumer goods that fill our lives. If we want to reduce our personal water consumption and impact, Tony Allan tells us to “stop eating ourselves into a corner”. Changes in food behaviour by industrialised country folk and global elites could save up to 40 percent of the water-for-food bill. We eat too much high-water-cost meat and too much food is thrown out. This we could change.

But the story gets truly interesting and the plot becomes both complex and more than a little foreboding as Prof. Allan ups the ante and takes us to the national level.

What happens when a population’s need for food is more than their water can produce? Trade, of course. Virtual water moves across the world encased in coffee beans, wheat kernels, and microchips. Spain used tourist revenue and high value agricultural goods to pay its virtual water food bill. But what if there is a water-related limit to this solution? If the country cannot produce enough tradable goods and service to buy the food it needs (and many need more water to do so,) and that water is decreasing

because of increasing population, higher demand levels and climate change, what then?

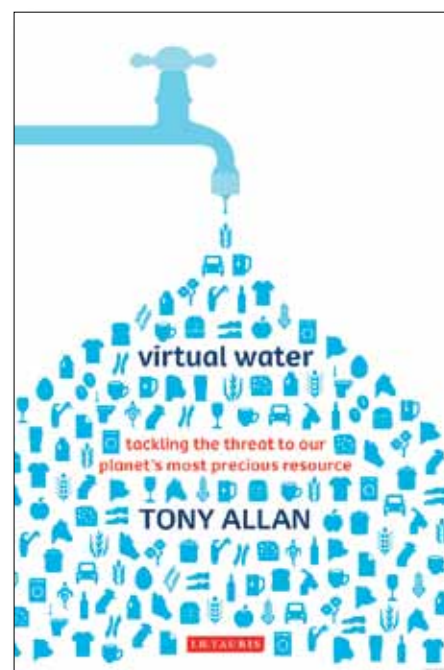
At the regional level, the feeling of impending doom and difficulties increase – the shared management of transboundary waters – the 270+ rivers, lakes, groundwater is already very difficult and is about to move to new stress levels.

He writes thoughtfully about the difficulty of managing – or even getting attention to a whole set of ‘invisibles’ – the invisible water in soil, the invisible virtual water encompassed in all of the goods we use and eat, the day to day invisibility of demographic growth, and others. Getting to tough decisions managing invisibles is in itself tough since “money and water flow nearly always in the same direction”, and “politicians stay in power by avoiding political costs”

There are solutions, of course. Many companies are doing good things with value chain analysis. China though strict population programmes averted the need to find the food (and water to grow it) for a population increase of 300 million people, enough to populate USA and Canada. Tony Allan strongly believes that solutions revolve around the farmer – if we will understand them, and help them, they will engineer the change processes necessary.

The book is a good read and a good ride – to India, Brazil, Vietnam, the Americas, China, the Middle East and North Africa – with a long felucca ride up and down the Nile. His insight and humour travel with us, globally, and back and forth in history. “Our ancestors probably ate vegetables because they didn’t run away or bite them back”.

Tony Allan is wise, infinitely knowledgeable in his field, witty, informative, persuasive – and right! Buy this book – buy 6 of them for Christmas/Chanuka/Kwanze/Divali or Eid presents – especially for your water over-using friends and anyone in a position to bring about change – by the way – that is all of us. Buy it. Read it. Do it!



► To read more about the book or order it, please visit [www.virtual-water.co.uk](http://www.virtual-water.co.uk)