

Water Hot Spots

Canadians can no longer take water supplies for granted

Water contamination

The recent water tragedies in **Walkerton, Ontario**, and **North Battleford, Saskatchewan**, show that Canadians cannot take the safety of their drinking water for granted. Water treatment systems can fail to protect the public if safety regulations are not followed, enforced and adequately funded. **First Nations reserves** and **rural communities** are most at risk from microbial contamination because they are more likely to rely on untreated water.

Epidemics in the past

 Cholera outbreaks in York (now **Toronto**) in 1832 and 1834 killed one-tenth of the population. The tragedy prompted public officials to build Canada's first sewer systems in 1834 to keep human waste from contaminating the drinking water source.

Chlorination

 Water treatment in most Canadian municipalities relies on chlorination. Chlorine by-products called

trihalomethanes (THMs) are linked to cancer and reproductive problems. Health Canada is currently studying the risks THMs pose to drinking water and have issued THM advisories for several **Newfoundland** communities in recent years. Residents of **Erickson, BC**, blockaded a chlorination plant in 1999 over these health and environmental concerns.

 One litre of oil can contaminate up to two million litres of water.

Resources

For basic information on water quality and contamination, see the **Pollution Probe Drinking Water Primer**: www.pollutionprobe.org/Publications/water.htm

Follow policy developments on water quality at the Canadian Environmental Law Association Web site: www.cela.ca/water/water.htm

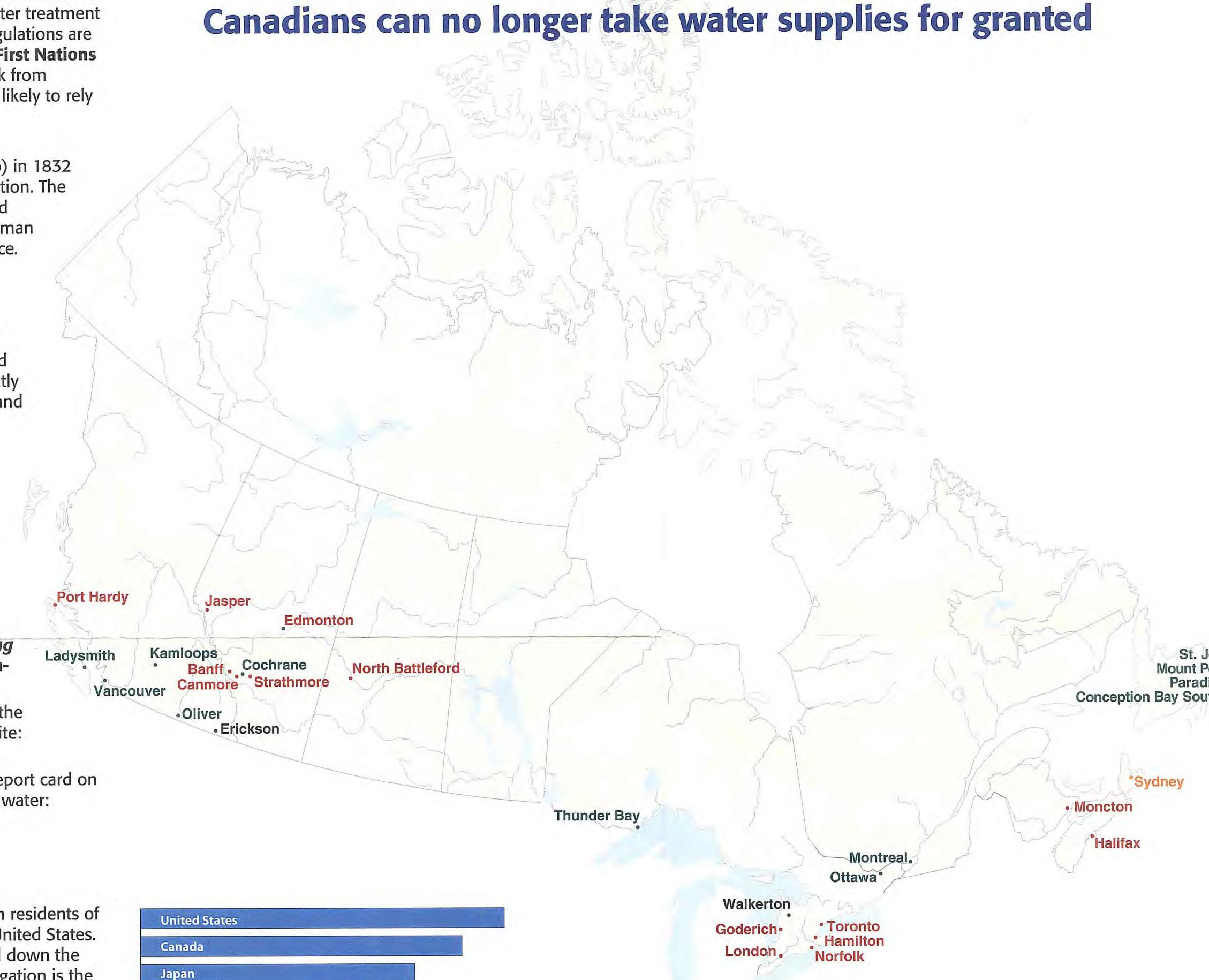
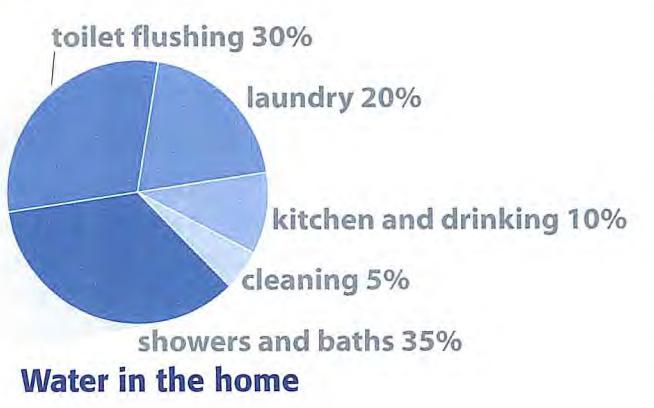
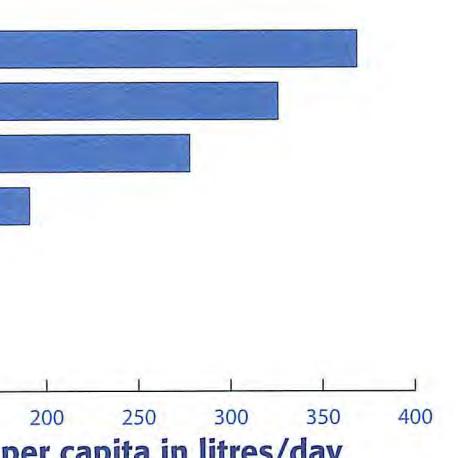
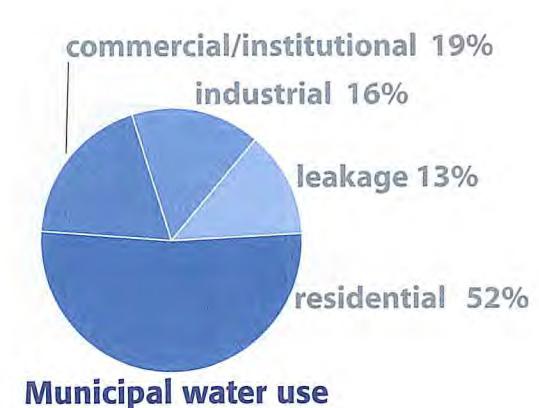
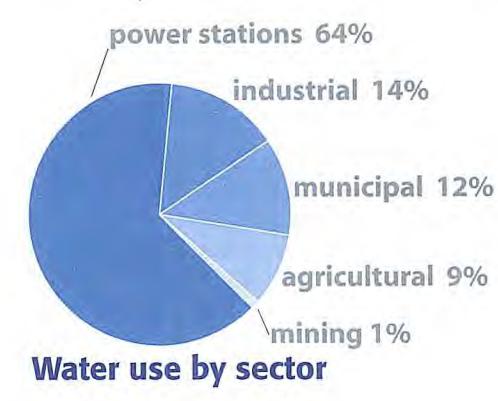
The Sierra Legal Defence Fund has prepared a report card on how well provincial legislation protects drinking water: www.sierralegal.org/reports/waterproof.pdf

Water consumption

Canadian households consume more water than residents of most other industrialized countries, except the United States. Much of this water is used inefficiently – flushed down the toilet and soaked into lawns. On the Prairies, irrigation is the largest consumer of water.

Environment Canada provides water conservation tips and data: www.ec.gc.ca/water/en/manage/effic/e_weff.htm

 Lawn watering can account for 50 to 75 percent of all municipally treated water used in the summer.



Scarce supply

Although Canada holds 20 percent of the world's fresh water, it has only seven percent of the world's fresh renewable water. Renewable water supply is what falls in rain and melts from glaciers each year, not the large volumes of water sitting in lakes.

Great Lakes pollution

One out of three Canadians and one out of seven US residents depend on the Great Lakes for their water. The Canadian and US federal governments, along with the relevant provinces and states, have been collaborating since 1978 to restore the lakes so that the water is drinkable, the beaches are swimmable and the fish safe to eat.

The International Joint Commission reports annually on the progress of Great Lakes restoration: www.ijc.org

Water for profit

Aggressive multinational water companies see drinking water and wastewater services as new frontiers for profit. They are courting cash-strapped Canadian municipalities in an effort to turn this public service into a lucrative business through "public-private partnerships" (PPPs), a form of privatization.

 **For profit** These municipalities have contracted out or entered into a PPP for some of their filtration, delivery and/or sewage treatment services.

 **Alert** These municipalities are considering a new PPP or contracting out some or additional filtration, delivery or sewage treatment services.

 **For profit rejected** These municipalities have rejected or cancelled private contracts due to strong public opposition and concern that private involvement would lead to full privatization and loss of public accountability.

For monthly updates on municipal privatizations see the Canadian Union of Public Employees' e-news bulletin: www.cupe.ca/www/P3Alerts

Bottled water

 Canadians spend more than \$300 million on bottled water every year, even though there is little evidence that bottled water is of higher quality than municipally treated water. About 30 billion litres/year are extracted by bottlers who pay almost no fees to do so. BC is the only province that charges bottlers, taking in a paltry \$25,000 annually. In many cases, bottled water is merely repackaged tap water. It is sold, however, at up to 1000 times the cost of tap water.

Water for export

 Popular rhetoric about how Canada is "water rich" often prompts speculation about exporting this valuable resource to "water poor" regions in the United States and less-industrialized countries. In the early 1990s, several corporations received approval to export water from **British Columbia** by supertanker. Before any water left BC the next provincial government banned bulk exports. Similar projects have been proposed for **Ontario**, **Newfoundland** and **Quebec**, but withdrawn after vociferous public opposition. Once bulk exports begin, they are likely subject to Canada's trade commitments under NAFTA and other multilateral trade agreements. These require domestic and foreign buyers to be charged the same price for water and make it difficult, if not impossible, to restrict or reduce the amount of water exported in future. Although some provinces have now banned bulk exports, the federal government has not passed any substantial legislation to back up its statements that our freshwater is safe.

The Council of Canadians is campaigning against bulk water exports: www.canadians.org

Receive a complimentary copy of **Troubled Waters: A Profile for Community Action** for your school or community group. Visit www.harmonymfdn.ca. Offer is limited.



Canadian Environmental
Law Association

 **Alternatives Journal**
CANADIAN ENVIRONMENTAL IDEAS & ACTION

This map is a special supplement to *Alternatives Journal* 29:2 (2003). For more copies of this map, go to www.alternativesjournal.ca or call 1-866-437-2587.

Printed in June 2003

