Water Shortages Are Increasing The number of people on Earth grows larger each year, but the supply of fresh water is not increasing. As a result, more than 1.6 billion people live in areas facing water shortages.

China is one of those countries. To meet the water needs of its large population, China is pumping large amounts of water out of underground supplies. However, these supplies are slowly shrinking because more water is being pumped out than is replaced by rainfall each year. Also, some rivers in China are so polluted that their water can't be used to irrigate crops.

Competition for limited water supplies can result in conflict since some rivers flow through many countries. When one country dams a river for irrigation water, it may reduce the amount of water flowing to countries downstream.

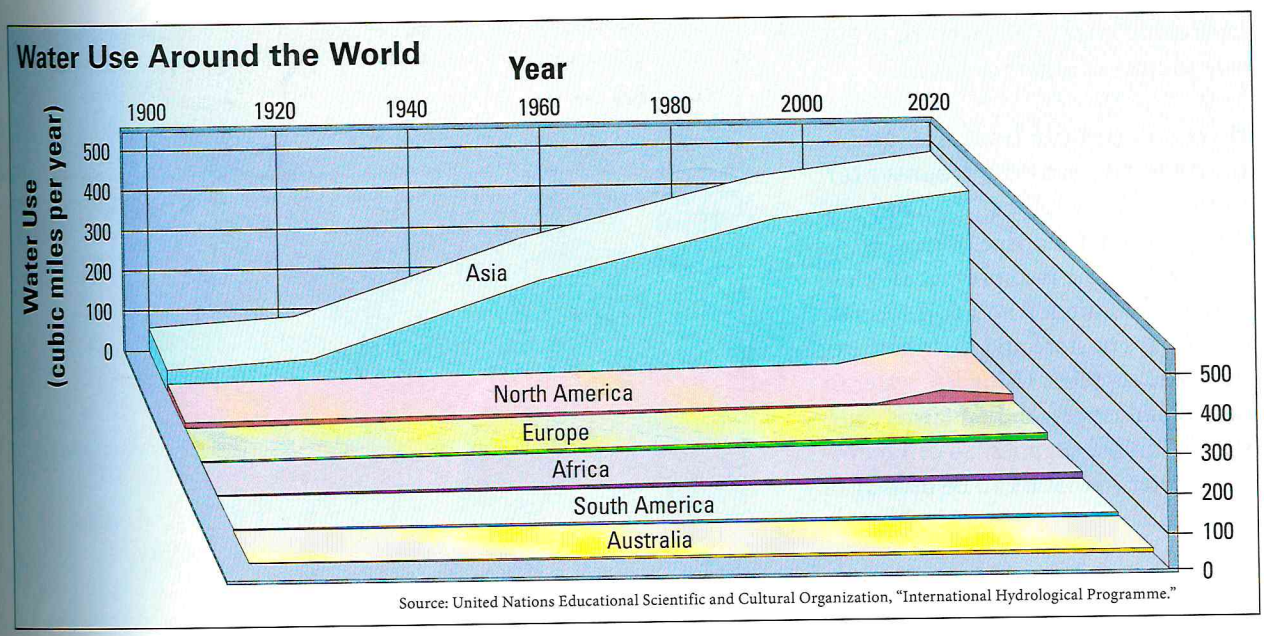
Egypt, for example, has a population of more than 81 million people, but it receives almost no rainfall. Instead, Egyptians depend on the Nile River to meet their water needs. Before reaching Egypt, though, the Nile travels through several countries. If any of those countries reduced the flow of the Nile, Egypt could be starved for water—and the result could be a water war.

Climate Change May Shrink Water Supplies In the last 25 years, Earth's climate has warmed slightly, and many scientists hypothesize that this warming trend will continue. (See Chapter 35 for more information on the theory of **global warming**.) Such a shift in climate could have an effect on water supplies. Some areas, for instance, might get less rainfall than they do today while others might experience much more rain and frequent flooding.

If these changes occur, managing water supplies will become more important than ever. Countries with shortages will need to improve their water collection and storage methods. On the other hand, those with too much water will need to improve their flood defenses. Think about these potential problems as you examine maps showing changes in the world's freshwater supplies in the next section.

A Thirsty World

Asia uses more water than any other continent, in part because it has such a large population. However, North Americans and Europeans use more water *per person* than people in other continents.



Source: United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, "International Hydrological Programme."