

What Happens When Day Zero Comes Here?

by Craig and Marc Kielburger



A winter of bitter winds but little snow gives way to a dry spring. April showers are just a nursery rhyme. City officials ask citizens to take shorter showers. The drought drags through summer. By September, the town pumps are dredging up mud. One morning, you turn on your tap and nothing comes out.

What do you do?

Cape Town is struggling to stave off “Day Zero”—when the South African city will become the world’s first metropolis to run out of water. With World Water Day approaching, we wonder: could that happen in Canada? If it does, we’re not ready.

We hear you laughing. Canada is waterlogged—20 percent of global freshwater resources live here. But much of our water is in remote areas, expensive to retrieve. And less than [half our water is renewable](#). Only about 1 percent of the Great Lakes are “new” water, refreshed each year, yet thirsty American cities [increasingly eye that bounty](#).

Many Indigenous communities already suffer water crises, with boil advisories and

shortages. The rest of Canada has yet to count down to Day Zero, but Mother Nature is giving us warning nudges. Over the past three years, Vancouver and other BC cities had to [enact heavy water restrictions](#); Regina and Moosejaw [lost their primary water source](#) to algae; Alberta [experienced record drought](#); and wells across Nova Scotia [dried up](#).

What might a severe water shortage look like in a Canadian city? We can’t know for certain, but we can look elsewhere for clues.

Brazil is a water-rich country like Canada, but Sao Paulo [almost ran dry in 2015](#). To protect the supply, the city shut off taps for up to 12 hours daily. When Zero Day arrives in Cape Town, residents will have to queue at [city-run distribution points](#) to get their ration of trucked-in water. Your daily schedule will revolve around quenching thirst.

You’ll have to tighten your pocketbook. Many Californians have seen [water bills double](#) during their multiyear drought. The well-to-do can afford bottled water at [undoubtedly inflated prices](#), or even shell out hundreds of dollars to have a [private company truck](#)

[water to their house](#). Others have to make do with the city’s water ration. In the aftermath of its shortage, the lowest-income communities of Sao Paulo saw an outbreak of health problems like urinary tract infections in women, caused by dehydration.

Water shortages often lead to civil unrest. A 2016 drought in southern India [led to violent riots](#) between residents of two states over the right to use shared water resources. We’d like to think Canadians are too polite for this, but a water crisis could pit cities against each other, making Senators versus Canadiens look like a tea party.

Despite alarming global events and telling signs here, Canadians are still complacent about our water. Our conservation efforts [compare poorly to other countries](#). We install low-flow toilets and shower heads, but remain the world’s second-biggest guzzlers of the wet stuff. Meanwhile, none of our governments have a playbook ready for when the reservoir dries up.

So, Canada, what’s our water plan? When the tap runs dry, it’s too late to ask what we could have done.

*Craig and Marc Kielburger are the co-founders of the **WE movement**, which includes WE Charity, ME to WE Social Enterprise and WE Day. For more dispatches from WE, check out **WE Stories**.*