

# Saving forests is the best way to cheap, clean water, says study

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By Karen Iley, Reuters

GENEVA — Major cities should focus efforts and funds on conserving forests, which naturally purify their drinking water, saving them from spending billions of dollars on water treatment facilities, a study published Monday showed.

The study of 105 big cities by the World Bank and the ecology organization the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-International) showed that one-third of them, including New York, Tokyo, Barcelona, and Melbourne, get much of their water via protected forests.

Preserving these forests — which reduce landslides, erosion, and sediment; improve water purity by filtering pollutants; and, in some cases, capture and store water — is a cost-effective way to provide clean drinking water, said the study "Running Pure."

"For many cities, time is running out. Protecting forests around water catchment areas is no longer a luxury but a necessity," said David Cassels, senior environmental specialist for forest resources with the World Bank. "When they are gone, the costs of providing clean and safe drinking water to urban areas will increase dramatically."

Chris Elliot, director of WWF's Forests for Life Program, highlighted the stark case of New York, whose 9 million residents get much of their water from the Catskill/Delaware watersheds in upstate New York.

A recent evaluation showed it would cost \$7 billion to build a water treatment plant, against a \$1 billion bill for actively managing the forest catchment area by raising water taxes and paying farmers to use less fertilizer and reduce grazing.

## "Smellbourne"

Melbourne — dubbed "Smellbourne" in the 18th century because of its poor water quality — took measures to protect the mountainous forest catchments to its north and east. Today these supply 90 percent of the drinking water in Melbourne, now recognized as having the highest quality water of any Australian city.

But Cassels argued that managing the forests should not be at the expense of people living in the areas, and end users who benefit from the forests should pay toward conserving them.

Authorities face tough choices between building houses for growing populations, chopping down forests for timber or conserving them to help secure the water supply, Elliot said.

But given World Health Organization estimates that 1.1 billion people do not have access to clean drinking water and that water-borne diseases claim 5 million lives each year, the WWF is calling on governments to boost their conservation efforts in water catchment areas.

Jamie Pittock, director of WWF-International's Living Waters program, argued that protection would help countries achieve their aim of halving the number of people without access to safe drinking water by 2015.

"These global targets can be most effectively achieved, in part, by investing in the health of these forest water catchments," he said. "By securing the source of the water, by investing in the health of the environment through these protected areas, we can make a big difference to people's lives."

Source: Reuters