

The Big Thirst

The Secret Life and Turbulent Future of Water

Charles Fishman

Reading Group Guide

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The following reading group guide is intended to help you find interesting and rewarding approaches to your reading of *The Big Thirst*. We hope this enhances your enjoyment and appreciation of the book. For a complete listing of reading group guides from Simon & Schuster, visit <http://community.simonandschuster.com>.

TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Big Thirst* describes a whole range of qualities of water—from the way it feels to us, and the impact it has on us emotionally, to the unusual and surprising ways companies and farmers use it, to the work and complexity necessary to get our water to us. What did you learn about water, or about how human beings use water, that surprised you most?
2. *The Big Thirst* devotes a lot of space to describing water’s molecular and chemical nature and its “hidden” impact—water is what makes your microwave oven work, water is what allows the continents to move and the space shuttle to be launched, water is the only substance we use routinely that was delivered from space in exactly the form it’s still in.

What’s the point of all this? Does knowing the backstory of water help you understand more practical water issues? Why do you think Charles Fishman decided it was important to write about water in this way, as if water were a character in the book?

3. Many places in the U.S. and the developed world facing water scarcity could solve their water problems by building either a seawater-desalination plant or a plant to clean and sanitize wastewater and return it to the drinking-water supply.

Imagine that you are an elected official having to choose between these two solutions. Which would you choose? How would you go about researching and making the choice?

Would you put aside your own research and decision if your constituents strongly objected to one source of water or the other?

Do you think you would be able to persuade skeptical citizens that reuse water is safe?

Why do Americans somehow think that drinking cleaned-

up seawater is more palatable than drinking cleaned-up city wastewater?

4. Since the hardcover edition of *The Big Thirst* was written, the drought in Australia that Fishman wrote about has ended dramatically, with so much rainfall that Australia went directly from drought to flooding.

Most parts of Australia that were in crisis two years ago now have enough water again. Does that change the lessons from Australia's struggle to remake its society to rely on less water—for Australia? for the rest of the world?

5. Throughout *The Big Thirst*, Fishman returns to the idea that water is too inexpensive. At one point, he writes, "If you had to pick one thing to fix about water, one thing that would help you fix everything else—scarcity, unequal distribution, misuse, waste, skewed priorities, resistance to reuse, shortsighted exploitation of natural resources—that one thing is price. The right price changes how we see everything else about water." (p. 291)

Do you agree?

If water should be priced more fairly, how would you go about doing that? What would you do with the fresh revenue from more expensive water? Is there a way of increasing the price of water without hurting poor people, without increasing the price of every product that relies on water?

6. One of the most important "sources" of water is conservation. If cities can teach their residents, and their corporate customers, to use less water, they can create the ability to add more residents and more economic activity without having to add more water.

One place that has done this dramatically is Las Vegas. But Las Vegas also has very strict water rules—the city regulates everything from the kind of hose nozzle you can use to wash your car to whether or not you can have a front lawn.

Would you be comfortable living with these kinds of water rules? Would they make sense in your community, even if it isn't as dry as Las Vegas?

Did the set of rules and practices that Las Vegas imposed to change water habits inspire any ideas for a different set of water-use rules in your own community?

7. Many people visit a place like Las Vegas—all those golf courses and resorts and subdivisions in the desert—and simply think, “There shouldn't be a city here. This is kind of crazy. Why don't they do a better job of limiting growth?”

And some conservationists and water policy experts think water officials in a dry community should shape public policies that use water limits to slow or stop growth.

Should the availability of water be a factor in determining how fast a community should grow or how big a city should be?

If a city wanted to use water scarcity as a tool to help manage growth, what kinds of rules and laws would it write?

8. Plenty of places in the U.S., and around the world, have ample water resources. Is there any value in “conserving” water, or creating water awareness, in communities that have abundant water?

How would you make the case for smart water use to citizens in a community where the water supply itself isn't under any pressure?

Are there other issues besides simple availability that ordinary people should be paying attention to?

9. As you were reading *The Big Thirst*, did you find yourself thinking about water differently as you went about your day-to-day tasks? In what ways? Fishman says in *The Big Thirst* that simply paying attention to water changes your attitude and behavior. Have you found that?