

Will Water Be the ‘Oil of the 21st Century’?
A quest for sustainable water management in China and worldwide

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Water became recognized as a limiting natural resource. In popular culture, water importance is compared to oil. We will examine parallels and contrasts between these two natural resources. The benefits of safe water supply extend beyond simple human needs and extend into many aspects of economy and society. While water is an ultimate renewable resource its availability depends on many natural, technical, economic, social and political factors. Global climate change, distribution of water resources, water transfers and virtual water trade, energy, and finance are some of the factors affecting actual water supply in a local context.

In China, water and wastewater management is a very big challenge – technically, socially, and politically. The country has limited water resources especially in the North. Limited supplies are exacerbated by population growth, industry needs and widespread pollution. These challenges are now widely recognized both at the official and societal level. Circular economy is a high national priority. What are the solutions and is there time to implement them? Possibly, yes but it will take a concerted effort and multi-targeted and multi- scale approaches.

In a bigger picture, the future of sustainable water management will depend as much on augmentation of available resources, conservation, better management and recycle as on changes of social and institutional attitudes to water. The future of water sustainability will not be simple but positive trends already emerge.