

Water is Life. Imagine a day without it.

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By [Sarah Deumling](#) and [John Miller](#)

Kids know why water is important. When asked what he would do on a day without water, Sarah's 5-year-old grandson replied "thirsty". When asked why rivers are good, a preschooler John met replied: "The river is good because it keeps the fish from drying out." Sarah grew up in a farming family in Molalla, John in a timber and farming family in Stayton. In the late summer afternoons after hot days working in the bean and berry fields, we would both cool off in our nearby rivers and creeks with our friends. John later worked in the forests and mills in the N. Santiam Canyon and studied Environmental Design in college. Sarah spent some time teaching after college, mostly on a Navajo Reservation where the houses weren't near a water source (early 1970s) because water was so precious that it needed to be shared among all. Everyone went to the nearest spring or other water source to haul water in wagons or pick-ups.

Rivers are central to our communities.

The Molalla and North Santiam rivers both begin in the west-side Cascade forests, the most productive watershed in terms of gallons per acre in the lower 48. We didn't know then that we were part of watersheds – the Molalla for Sarah and John's Santiam, which both flowed into the Willamette and then through Portland and into the mighty Columbia – whose watershed is the size of France and includes 7 states and a province. *Water connects us all.*

Sarah now lives in and cares for a forest along the top of the Eola Hills in the Central Willamette Valley. Her forest includes the headwaters of three different watersheds, the South Yamhill River, Spring Valley Creek, and Rickreall Creek, all of which flow into the Willamette. She and her family have "days without water" whenever the power, and therefore the well pump, go out. The solution is to go to the neighbors who have public water with a "May I borrow a cup of water?" approach with a couple of gallon containers behind her. It is surprising how little potable water one needs in a day (drinking and cooking) and a couple of gallons is usually plenty, depending of course, on the size of the household.

John has a home, vineyard, and native plant nursery in the South Salem hills where he farms 30 acres with a 20 gallon per minute well using mostly drip irrigation. He has an alter-ego in urban design and development and has been guided by nature making communities that include urban tree canopies and stormwater management with bioswales instead of underground pipes. His property includes a wetland and forest that is the “headwaters” of a fork of Pringle Creek that flows through Salem into the



Willamette. He is working to incorporate this natural area into a plan that will provide a place for outdoor learning for the adjacent elementary school and preschool.

Both our properties are in official “Groundwater Limited Areas” which means that the basalt aquifers that provide much of our water are being depleted faster than they can regenerate. When new developments are permitted in these hills, they are dependent on new deep wells that can and do cause long-existing wells to run short. Managing water use is therefore a daily task for us both and the impacts of adjacent land uses are an ongoing concern. Upon reflection, Sarah thinks she has always been a water worrier. Her father pumped water out of the Molalla River to keep the pastures green, and growing up on her family farm she wondered silently about irrigation and worried what would happen if we just kept irrigating more and more land. It was not a topic of conversation but she listened carefully to the lessons in school about the water cycle and comforted herself that perhaps her worries were misplaced, that the water would just keep cycling so they would always have enough.

Valuing water for tomorrow.

We both were so lucky to have parents, grandparents, and mentors who valued the natural world and showed us that we could have careers that combined a love of nature with work that is both fun and meaningful. So, we both have valued water most of our lives and we have both taken somewhat oddball trajectories that have involved some bushwhacking off the beaten path. We are now grateful to find that some of the lessons we, and others, have learned by trial and error are now becoming more mainstream. We are hoping that by sharing our stories we can help open some doors to the world of careers guided by nature and provide some tools for everyday water-wise living.

Our wonderful westside Cascade forests that we both played in and that paid for our food, clothes, and schooling are sorely wounded. Regardless of why these and other magical western forests became so vulnerable to wildfire, the challenge of finding resilience and

recovery for these human and wild communities is important to us all. Oregon's State Capitol's water comes from the North Santiam River above Stayton. When the poisonous algae blooms appeared, Salem's water supply was impacted and there were no lattes or mochas for legislators for weeks. Water temperature as well as nutrient runoff from farms and forests and residents were to blame as well as ash from previous fires. This is a worldwide problem and will be solved at a watershed level, not by local chemical or mechanical means alone.

Our kids are watching more what we do than what we say. We can't allow the lost decades of the Timber Wars to happen again and hikers, loggers, rural and urban residents working together and listening to each other are the key to success. Providing jobs in the timber industry and for other forest products such as clean water and air, carbon storage and recreation can be mutually supportive. We can reset our approach to managing both public and private forests throughout the West and heal these green spigots that quell our children's thirst and keep the fish from drying out. This project of protecting Oregon's water is going to take a lot of us with a lot of commitment to civic engagement and personal responsibility. Join us, bring your kids, water is life.



Credit to Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District

This guest blog was inspired by the [10 Ways Oregon Could Be A Water Leader](#) and published for [Imagine a Day Without Water 2020](#).

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