

When you drink water, remember the spring

By: Arnold van Krevelend

Predictions of looming environmental disaster tend to grab public attention, but they are not what inspire us most. Stories about conservation and sustainability successes do. We need to hear these more often, as they fuel the optimism needed to find new solutions. For example, many of us don't realize that the river Rhine was 'an open sewer' only a few decades ago. It took until 1987 before serious international action was taken. Once that decision was taken, however, within a decade pollution levels plummeted and the river became alive again. This example shows we are capable of great things if we put our mind to it.

We will need optimism and much action the coming years. In 2010 Lloyds predicted severe shortage and degradation of global water supplies over the next 30 years. Some areas are already affected and business will suffer. This year the World Economic Forum named water security a 'systemic global risk'. In other words, a risk that could lead to the breakdown of an entire economic system. Some companies came to realize that water scarcity and continued pollution pose direct and serious business threats. These companies are not waiting for governments to impose regulations. Instead, they are proactive and look for solutions beyond their own facilities. After all, that is where much of the problem stems from. As an old Chinese proverb says: "when you drink water, remember the spring".

A clean fish in a dirty pond

H&M realizes that it shares the "springs" feeding its value chain with many other users. Cleaning up its own operations is a good start, but if others don't join in, the business risks remain. Stuart Orr, Head of WWF International's Water Stewardship, came up with a proverb of his own that captures this dilemma: "It is not enough to be a clean fish in a dirty pond". At H&M they realize this is true, and they know collective action is needed to make a difference. But how to motivate others to chip in?

H&M and WWF became aware that they needed each other. Together they could achieve much more than when working alone. In 2011 they initiated a formal collaboration and assessed all water-related aspects of the H&M value chain. This resulted in a new water strategy for H&M. After that they set forth implementing the strategy through a joint partnership targeting suppliers, staff, consumers, governments and all other stakeholders. The goal: to gain experience, set an example and inspire others to get involved in water stewardship.

In the few years since then H&M has made significant progress. All 116,000 H&M employees were trained on sustainability, improved routines to enforce appropriate waste water treatment in supply chains have been introduced and the first closed loop products from H&M's own garment collecting initiative were launched. A big challenge ahead is to support suppliers with dyeing, printing and finishing of textiles to implement improved water and chemical management.

Taihu basin

H&M is initiating fashion industry water stewardship actions with WWF in Taihu Basin, China. This concentrated area of fabric and processing factories is located in one of the three priority wetland conservation areas for biodiversity listed by the China Academy of Science. The aim of these actions is to optimize internal water management of textile industrial parks and engage various stakeholders to take shared responsibilities for basin sustainability. Localized water stewardship methodology will be implemented to improve water performance at site level as well as facilitate more efficient water use at the industrial park level. At the same time, water impacts and water risks of the industrial park on the surrounding catchment will be analyzed and mapped for the future risk mitigation work. Collective actions of different stakeholders in the sub-basin will be launched to address water issues and advocate good water planning and management for the sustainability of basin development and conservation. H&M is following the progress, even when there are bumps in the road, with optimism. Felix Ockborn: "When the entire catchment benefits from our preparations and others are inspired to get into action, then we know we are being successful. After all, we all swim in the same pond..."