

Sustaining water resources in South East England

JOHN C. RODDA

Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Wallingford, Oxfordshire, UK and Hydro-GIS Ltd, Chalgrove, Oxfordshire, UK
jandarodda@waitrose.com

Abstract Water is one of the most crucial issues for virtually every nation. Floods, droughts, pollution, lack of reliable public supplies, no effective sanitation and similar predicaments pose innumerable problems in the developing world, but also in the developed world. While poor communities where the infrastructure is minimal invariably suffer most, there can also be considerable difficulties in richer regions. Population increase, rising demand for water per capita, ageing water mains, sewers and treatment works, lack of investment, unforeseen effects of government policies, environmental constraints and the impact of climate variability and change are factors which can stress water resources and degrade water services. This is the case in the United Kingdom's South East England Region, where the meagre resources are coming under increasing pressure. This is one of the driest parts of the UK and, except for London, the most densely populated. But the South East England Plan (SEP, 2006) formulated at the behest of central government requires the Region to accommodate at least 1 million more people by 2026, with scant regard for the risk that water resources and the water services that rely on them will be unable to cope. Climate change, together with the restrictions imposed on abstractions by international agreements, heighten this risk. This paper examines these stresses, potential solutions and the dilemma facing government. Should existing policies be maintained with consequences for the environment, particularly during droughts? Should water be transferred from more humid parts of mainland UK, again with consequences for the environment? Should the planned increase in population go ahead?

Key words water resources; South East England; water stress; governance; planning; environment