



## Why Australia holds the key to help California cut its Water Use

Marcus Barber

@rightfuture

A recent article on Tirple Pundit suggested that Californians are keen to lower their water usage but don't know how to go about doing so. That article ([found here](#)) also indicated that even the most ardent of conservation efforts do not seem to be assisting the state meet its reduced water target, and that no one seemed to know what to do next.

Which is why California might benefit from looking beyond its borders to the Land Down Under, Australia, the driest inhabited continent on earth, for clues as to what happened last time one of its states (Victoria) experienced a decade long drought.

Because if there's one thing that California can learn from Victoria it is this: people can change their habits and long lasting benefits will result.

First up, let's start with the uncomfortable question that California MUST answer if it is to get through this drought relatively unscathed:

'Life' or 'Lifestyle'?

Please appreciate that from now on, every choice you make about how you use water falls into one OR the other category. Want to wash your car? That's Lifestyle. Want to water your plants to keep them alive? That's Life. A ten minute shower? That's Lifestyle. A four minute shower with buckets to capture some run-off? That's Life. Topping up your swimming pool? That's Lifestyle. Leaving that water available so the municipality can water the local park? That's Life



The choices you make determine how seriously you are taking this. And what the Australian State of Victoria also knows is that the policies were SLOW to recognise what was happening, how bad it was, and what should be done. And for that our loss of habitats, parklands, wildlife, sporting fields and social pleasantness all evaporated to alarger extent that what could have occurred had we acted sooner. From where I sit, California isn't moving quickly enough

With that in mind, here's some tips for both personal and municipal use that saw Victoria's perilous water storage levels first decline, then shrink to the point that losses were mainly evaporation driven.

#### Personal Use Tips:

*If it's Yellow, Let it Mellow* - a simple idea that reduces your water usage for toilets by allowing the 'just fluid' to wait longer before being whisked away by a large dose of fresh water.

*Increase usage but reduce consumption:* If you have a shower, ALL of that water goes down the drain. If you have a bath and use it smartly, you can wash, then bucket that water onto your garden to keep your plants alive.

*Just a shower?* You must use buckets to capture as much as you can for use elsewhere. If you use a bucket to capture the first run of cold water, that water can later be used to flush a toilet or for some other purpose.

*Got a Garden?* During summer take one of your showers outside under a hose. Two things will happen - one, you'll tend to have much shorter and more efficient showers, and two, all of that water will keep some part of your lawn or plant life alive.



*The Four Minute shower.* This target was introduced in Victoria to encourage the second largest area of water use in the typical home, to cut back. Water agencies handed out four minute egg timers to stick on your shower screen. The idea worked incredibly well. It teaches you to shower from the top down and NEVER 'soak' under the stream. I've written previously on my thoughts about the [4 Minute Shower Concept](#)

*Put a Brick in it!* (in your toilet cistern) - the displaced water will save you every time you flush.

*A clean car is a Lifestyle choice.* Car paint is really resilient and does NOT need to be washed - leave it dirty and do everyone a favour.

*Put a shade sail over your veggie patch* - the shade keeps the plants cooler meaning they require less water and growth will hardly be hindered.

*Disconnect your downpipes* so that the sudden but short bursts of rain can be directed not into a waste stream but onto your garden.

Almost EVERY single drop of your bath, shower and clothes-washing can be used on your gardens, especially if you use low salt soaps. But do NOT use water from your dishwasher or sink as the food oils are not good for your plants.

*When washing clothes:* It's very RARE for your clothes to get dirty during the day. Either wear them again or at least wash them on the shortest possible cycle you can.

In the Triple Pundit article mentioned it said Californians had reduced water use in 2010 down to around 180 Gallons per day. To put this in perspective in the State of Victoria, the Government target was less than 160 LITRES per day. In our household of four people we managed to get usage down to around 57 litres per person or about 15 Gallons per day



and no we're not grungy ferals, just every day people working out where we waste water!  
ANYTHING above 50 Gallons per person per day is unjustifiable

### Life or Lifestyle?

What each of these ideas requires is for people to understand water really is not a never ending resource and now with years of excessive use habits firmly ingrained, the adjustment will be initially uncomfortable. But it really won't hurt you.

Municipal water saving ideas:

*Swimming Pools and Spas:* What rules are in place to restrict people filling up their swimming pools? In Victoria one of the vegetable growers that had access to high salt (low quality) water managed to do a deal with the pool and spa association and local councils so that new pools could be filled with the water not suitable for human consumption but perfectly fine to swim in.

*Which parks are you keeping alive and why?* We had whole sporting clubs forced off grounds and playing fields that were too hard and therefore unsafe for play. If you don't get smart about which parks you'll keep alive and why, expect social dislocation of local sporting clubs. At the same time, recommend that clubs practise less on turf fields to reduce strain on grass. This will help stop them from turning into a dustbowl

There was widespread loss of mature trees in Council parks worth millions of dollars - far better saving the trees than watering the grass because the long term benefits of trees are huge and grass takes far less time to recover

*Rain & Roof:* Allow people to disconnect their down pipes and to easily install rain water tanks and lead by example in municle buildings.



*Swap bad for Good:* Encourage people to fit low flow shower heads, instigate a 'swap for free' trade in.

*Ban high use water products* like certain sprinklers, shower heads and pivot sprayers. In farming areas begin having the hard conversations about which produce deserves the water given the restrictions. Understand that this is a very difficult area for many farmers but most will want to help wherever they can

*Shade for Good:* Put up more shade sails in your parks. It's a low cost and usually easy fit improvement to park amenities that also reduces water use.

*Ruralfication* - Municipal roof tops and corporate roof tops are ripe for the greening as are living walls that not only add colour, they significantly reduce the heat island effect as well as providing cleaner air. Think about how you can 'ruralfy' your cityscapes through food walls or green tops

*Plant Selection:* Make sure you are only planting drought tolerant species across your municipalities. And yes, high water use plants should be removed if replaced by ones putting less strain on the environment

*Theft & Leaks:* Be alert to water theft from your local storage areas and put significant effort into rapid response to hydrant or pipe breaks because not only do you save water, it shows citizens you are serious

*Engage Commercial Businesses:* Encourage factories to capture water from their vast roof spaces. They could use this for their own needs, give it to their staff or they could donate the water to a local sporting club or school. Get office buildings to think about green spacing their roof tops or car parks



*TALK to your citizens.* Most will want to do the right thing and they want it to be a shared effort. Public forums about use of parks, planting, issues with water consumption and ideas for saving need to be happening all the time. You can't rely on legislation without the dialogue with the people.

### Life versus Lifestyle - it's your call California

Marcus Barber is a Strategic Futurist and co-founder of the Centre for Australian Foresight. His Masters thesis looked at water consumption approaches around the world and the difficulty with finding solutions that are mismatched to local conditions. He has consulted to numerous Government and for-profit water organisations in Australia and around the world.

[Marcus.Barber@cfaf.com.au](mailto:Marcus.Barber@cfaf.com.au)

[LUFG.Com.Au](http://LUFG.Com.Au)

@rightfuture