
REDUCED FLOW

CLIMATE CHANGE AND WATER SUPPLIES

THE RIVER PERSONIFIED was Anna Livia Plurabelle; her city took the form of Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker. In “Finnegans Wake,” James Joyce used their union to tell a universal story of rivers and cities. The River Liffey, with its “waters of babalong,” was the beginning and end. It gave the city its life.

It still gives life—the Liffey today provides 80 percent of Dublin’s drinking water—but the river’s ability to sustain Dublin is in doubt. With global warming leading to changes in Ireland’s rainfall patterns, ensemble models show that Liffey flows could be 20 percent lower by 2020 than they are now and 50 percent lower by mid-century. Those reductions could be paired with an increase in demand: The Dublin City Council forecasts a 60 percent growth in Dublin’s water needs by 2031. (The spike would come from the 1 million additional people expected to live in the region.)

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To meet future demand, the council is considering building desalination plants—an expensive option. Less costly, but proving to



As Dublin looks to the Shannon for new sources of water, protest signs appear at Athlone.

the Shannon Protection Alliance, notes that “the last great battle of Lough Ree” was fought in A.D. 903 and warns that “those Dublin officials should know that this will be fought

in water-rich Ireland—would be a sure way to find “new” sources of water.

Still, the current battle is evidence of the societal strains that may come with global warming. The frailties of human practices and systems can be exposed and made worse by climate change. And tensions are sure to rise when a natural resource grows scarce—particularly one assumed to be as constant as Dublin’s fresh water supply.

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be far more controversial, is a proposed alternative: extracting Shannon River water from Lough Ree.

A wide range of groups actively oppose doing that. The Shannon Regional Fisheries Board and Inland Waterways Association have raised both environmental and economic concerns, while a group set up to resist the plan,

just as hard.” As its spokesman, PJ Walsh says, “We won’t let them put as much as a straw into the river.”

Dublin’s water woes have many causes, and the solutions will be varied. Repairing or replacing the city’s Victorian-era pipes would cut down on the large losses through leakage. And serious conservation efforts—unheard of

