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### Australia Drying Up - Fast!

2006-12-30 05:39:00

Posted By: Intellpuke

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Satellites have been used to map all of Australia's fresh water for the first time, and the picture is bleak. In just three years, the continent has suffered a net loss of 46 cubic kilometers of fresh water - enough to fill Sydney Harbor more than 90 times.

Initial results of an extraordinary international satellite project provide yet another indication that Australia is drying out.

Based on current consumption patterns of about 1.5 billion liters a day, the water lost could have quenched Sydney's thirst for more than 80 years.

The discovery has been made using two U.S. and German satellites designed to map all the world's water stocks - a task never before possible.

(story continues below)

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Launched by a Russian rocket in 2002, GRACE, the Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment, involves two identical craft circling 220 kilometers apart, 485 kilometers up. By repeatedly plotting variations in the tug of earth's gravity, GRACE can estimate changes in the mass of the water below. "Even water in aquifers," said Jay Famiglietti, a hydrologist at the University of California, Irvine. It also measures water in river basins and reservoirs.

While key findings will not be published until next year, Professor Famiglietti calculated for the Sydney Morning Herald the overall decline observed in Australia's fresh water. Between February 2003 and January this year, Australia lost the 46 cubic kilometers. "Some regions are gaining, while others are losing," said the professor.

However, it would take another five years of mapping before his team could say if Australia's drying was a short-term variation created by drought, or a long-term trend triggered by climate change. "Once we have longer observations we will be able to weigh in on that debate," he said. "We know Australia is in drought. The data is agreeing with that."

While GRACE can map changes in the total mass of fresh water below, it cannot tell what is driving the variations.

Associate Professor Jeffrey Walker, from the University of Melbourne, and former Ph.D. student Kevin Ellett, from the U.S. Geological Survey, have been working in the Murrumbidgee catchment, comparing their ground measurements with GRACE's data on the entire Murray-Darling basin. It could lead to computer models for world water managers to interpret the information from space.

Putting GRACE's observations into context, it was Ellett who pointed out that the water lost in three years "equates to 92 Sydney Harbors". The Murray-Darling region lost "roughly 6000 gigaliters over the three years, or 12 Sydney Harbors".

GRACE has completed the first assessment of global freshwater stocks. "Some continents have increasing water storage - for example, North America," Professor Famiglietti said; but significant drying had been seen in African river basins, including the Congo, Zambezi and the Nile. "The global result will be interesting," he said. "I think it will have implications for the climate change debate."

GRACE maps the world's water every month, working on the principle that "water is heavy". When one satellite passes over water, the

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increased gravitational pull makes the probe above speed up, altering the distance between it and its orbiting twin.

"The distance between the GRACE satellites is a couple of hundred kilometers ... we can track the difference to within the thickness of a red blood cell," said the professor. "It blows me away".

**Intellpuke:** You can read this article by Sydney Morning Herald reporter Richard Macey in context here: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/environment/australia-drying-up-fast/2006/12/29/1166895479947.html>

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