

increases steadily year on year. And the politics of water — for that is what its governance involves — could yet hold a lesson for more-solid human affairs. Even the definition of water governance is political, and a hard-won human compromise, so it can seem a bit, well, fluid: the social, economic and political systems that control decision-making on water-resource development and management.

Its goal is surely one that all can agree on: to make sure that people do not have too much water, nor too little, and that it's not too polluted. But the ways of achieving that across the globe mirror the governance of water turned into snowflakes: no two circumstances are identical.

A 2013 study, for instance, reported on the introduction of sustainable practices to maintain water flow in the local environment (rather than piping it away for human use) at river basins in China and Australia (R. Q. Grafton *et al. Nature Clim. Change* 3, 315–321; 2013). Whereas changes to China's Yellow River were imposed by the central Communist government, improvements in the Murray–Darling River basin were the product of a market-based system that encouraged the trading (and non-use) of extraction permits.

Those are the (limited) success stories. But the harsher reality of politics frequently pours into water governance. And as a microcosm of the wider world, different attempts to manage water resources often serve only to make other options seem more attractive. Perhaps more than for any other natural resource, the various groups in society can see something different reflected back when they look at water. It's a source of life, hygiene, crops, leisure, industry, livelihood — or just a pretty view — and those interpretations often collide. It's easy to see why scholars of water governance typically prefer to focus on the actors rather than on the actions that are needed.

That's another reason why the Morocco conference next month should be recognized. It is the latest in a long process that aims to guide policies of water governance. Run under the umbrella of the OECD, the Water Governance Initiative works to set principles and share good practice. It aims, for example, to increase the number of river basins

that are assessed and given management plans, and to encourage countries to identify and crack down on corruption in the water business.

It is making progress. Last year, the initiative agreed on a dozen principles to guide water governance, and is now consulting on suitable indicators that could be used to measure progress. Scientists can do their bit here: one of the key principles is the need for policy-relevant and timely data and information on water use and resources.

**“Many lakes and rivers have disappeared in our own lifetimes.”**

Indeed, some such information appears in a *Nature* research paper published online this week (J.-F. Pekel *et al. Nature* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/nature20584>; 2016) that offers the most comprehensive picture yet of the planet's water resource. The study collects and collates more than 3 million satellite images of Earth's surface taken over the past three decades, and shows how surface water — rivers, lakes and wetlands — has ebbed and flowed. If there is, or was until recently, a pool of open water at least 30 square metres near you, then it's probably included in this map. The pictures reveal some big numbers: nearly 4.5 million square kilometres of the planet's land surface has been under water at some point since 1984 (still just 3%). More than half of this is in the global north, above a latitude of 44° N.

Although we think of lakes and rivers as features of the landscape, many have disappeared in our own lifetimes. More than 90,000 km<sup>2</sup> of water bodies thought to be permanent have disappeared — including giant chunks of the Aral Sea — and a further 72,000 km<sup>2</sup> is now classed as only seasonally flooded. But overall, there has been more flow onto the land than away from it: almost 213,000 km<sup>2</sup> of land that was dry in 1984 is now covered in water for some periods, often inside new reservoirs.

Climate change has a role in these shifts, but the biggest cause of water movement is direct human activity. Some regions have too much, others too little. Water governance deserves its place on the global agenda before it's too late. ■

## Word power

*How the books children read can trigger a lifelong fascination with science.*

Even *Nature* editors were young once. And in a Books & Arts special this week, *Nature* readers can get a little insight into what makes those editors tick — or, at least, what helped to turn them on to science (see page 194). Forget virtual-reality goggles and computer-simulated, movement-sensitive interactions. These were the olden days, and stories of the world reached our young editors from inside the covers of books.

Ask someone what reading material inspired them as a child, and few will be honest enough to say that it was comics such as the *Beano*. So we have to trust our editors when they say they spent their formative years curled up with childhood investigations of chemistry, physics, mathematics and, chiefly, the natural world. But reading their recollections — and, indeed, how some read more-modern works with their own children — it's easy to see why they did so.

The pages they describe tell science as opportunity and discovery, learning without instruction, and of fascination and imagination. More, it is science as embedded in society and the world, science as a relevant, integral, natural and core ingredient for a curious and active mind. With a foundation like that, it's easy to see why *Nature* editors and readers sometimes struggle to understand how anyone would choose to see the world in any other way.

To analyse the content of children's science books can be like pulling the beard of Father Christmas to see if it's real. Some of the magic is

lost in the process. But there is a serious — and an educational — side to children's books. Their influence is great, and as such their style and content have been scrutinized over everything from their depictions of violence and gender roles, to people's attitudes to the environment and recycling. If books leave such a lasting impression on people, then should scientists and researchers do more to make sure that those read to and by children are accurate? Where, for example, does fiction tip into fantasy — and should young readers be made aware of the difference?

These concerns can seem overblown and ripe for ridicule. Does the anthropomorphism of cats and dogs in stories make children believe that their pets can talk? (Probably not.) But can representations of humans as superior and somehow distinct from other animal species fuel misconceptions about our origins? (Perhaps.)

For an example of the power of children's literature to mislead, simply look up at the sky. The phases of the Moon is a tricky concept to grasp at first, and studies show that even university science graduates mistakenly attribute them to Earth's shadow. (In fact, as you know, the Moon's phases reflect how much of its sunlit half is visible from Earth.) Educationists put much of the blame for this on the way in which the Moon is shown in children's books, including the much-loved Eric Carle classic *Papa, Please Get the Moon for Me*.

The literary lunar laxness goes even deeper. If children and many adults are sometimes surprised to see the Moon in the daytime, then some of the blame for that can be placed on kids' books, too. (And so, but less commonly, can the expectation that a cow will leap over it.)

The Moon aside, children's books are rightly viewed as a greatly valued resource of science. Yes, even those of Eric Carle. Kids may not grasp celestial mechanics, but most know the life cycle of the butterfly. That's assuming, of course, they have read Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. ■