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A Nairobi 'Suds Tsunami' and Other Water Woes

By [ANDREW C. REVKIN](#)

[M. Sanjayan](#), the lead scientist for the Nature Conservancy and a contributor to CBS News, posted this remarkable photograph on Twitter on Saturday:

Incredible photo I shot 2day.Suds tsunami engulf #Nairobi bridge as rain stirs up polluted #river <http://t.co/lpdzLgKY>
- [M Sanjayan \(@msanjayan\)](#) 3 Nov 12

The snapshot says much about the huge scope of water problems in developing countries. Reached by e-mail, Sanjayan said this:

This river flows right through the [Kibera slums](#) so a lot of people depend on it and then it flows into the [Athi River](#) that feeds a national park... with hippos, crocs, buffalo, lions and 300-plus species of birds. [*I added the links for context.*]

Here's background on Nairobi River pollution from the [United Nations Environment Program](#) and a [2009 article](#) by [Abdi Latif Dahir](#), a young Kenyan journalist mentored through a [UPI journalism training initiative](#).

This fall, my colleagues at Pace University's Pace Academy for Applied Environmental Studies are trying to raise awareness of local and global opportunities to improve water quality with the [.007% Campaign](#), which is built around the idea that 0.007 percent of Earth's water is, by some calculations, available for drinking, irrigation and other human uses -- so it'd be best to use it wisely.

The image at right is from a gallery of graphics describing some of the issues that persist despite extraordinary progress against water pollution problems in recent decades. For a snapshot of what progress looks like, go back to the 1996 New York Times series "[A River Reclaimed](#)" ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)) that I was lucky enough to write with William K. Stevens, who preceded me on the environment beat.

The images in the [Pace gallery](#) all center on numbers. Click for the meaning: [1,000](#), [2 million tons](#), [1970](#), [68%](#), [20 seconds](#).

[The Clean Water Act](#) in the United States, 40 years old last month, has spurred substantial

progress and the world has, three years ahead of schedule, met a 2015 Millennium Development Goal of cutting in half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water.

But there's plenty of work to be done. And not just where pollution boils up into "suds tsunamis."

Every problem is an opportunity. [Click here](#) to see how the Blacksmith Institute, a group focused on pollution hot spots in poor places, is working with an organization in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to stanch the flow of offal and waste from a slaughterhouse into the Msimbazi River.