

# Green Scene: Who is Protecting our Water?

by Elaine Golds

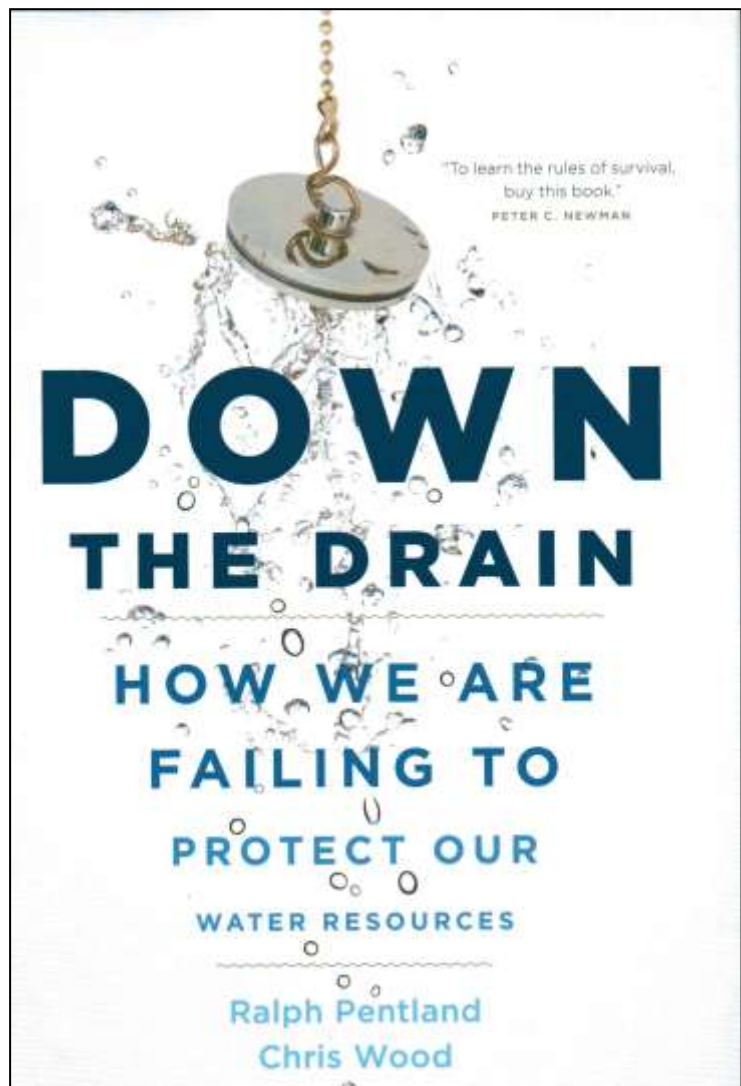
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Last Sunday was World Rivers Day. Appropriately, it was a day of heavy rain which offered great conditions for salmon moving upstream to spawn but may have dampened the spirits of volunteers who were at outdoor events to celebrate our waters. We have such an abundance of water in this part of BC that it is all too easy to take it for granted. But who is protecting water quality and working to ensure rivers continue to flow and support vital ecosystems across Canada? If you think it is the federal government, you're very wrong.

At least, this is the point of view expressed in the recently published book, "*Down the Drain, How We Are Failing to Protect Our Water Resources*" by Ralph Pentland and Chris Wood.

Cover of book, '*Down the Drain*',  
available at Coquitlam Public Library.  
B. Brandhorst photo.

These authors provide an enlightening overview of legislation in Canada which is supposedly protecting our rivers as well as the quality of the waters that flow in them. Soon after Confederation in 1867, Prime Minister Macdonald wisely brought forward legislation to protect fish and prevent the release of chemical substances or other deleterious substances into the water. This was the *Fisheries Act*, Canada's first environmental legislation and, until recently, arguably the most effective such legislation ever passed in Canada. This was followed in 1882 with the *Navigable Waters Protection Act* designed to protect waterways and prevent the dumping of material into streams, rivers and lakes. Both of these long-standing and highly-respected Acts were severely weakened by the Harper government last year.



Because the *British North America Act* delegated the authority to regulate natural resources to the provinces, the federal government has remained timid about undertaking effective measures to protect drinking water. As a consequence, we still have only federal drinking water guidelines rather than regulations. This sets us apart from most of the developed nations of the world where enforceable regulations to protect drinking water quality are in place. In this regard, British Columbia is long overdue to modernize its *Water Act*; there are indications the provincial government may finally undertake this in 2014.

While Pentland and Wood provide fascinating histories of a number of river systems in Canada, I found their description of what is happening in the Mackenzie River system and its upstream tributaries to be the most compelling example of the challenges we face to protect our rivers. The Mackenzie River system, the 10<sup>th</sup> largest river basin in the world, drains 20% of Canada. Its annual discharge is immense—only slightly smaller than that of the St. Lawrence River. The fossil energy reserves found within the land it drains are among the largest in the world. Yet, as Canadians, we know little about the magnificent Mackenzie and the threats it faces. The Peace and Athabaska Rivers are its major upstream tributaries which flow east from the Rockies. Where these two rivers meet at the western end of Lake Athabaska in northern Alberta, one of the largest inland river deltas on earth is formed. Its only rival for size is the much celebrated Okavango delta in Africa. I would guess more Canadians have heard of the Okavango delta than our own. The wetlands where the waters of Peace and Athabaska mingle are one of the most important nesting grounds for waterfowl in North America including endangered whooping cranes. In 1983, the United Nations proclaimed these wetlands as a World Heritage Site.

The Athabaska River, which flows through the tar sands, is now becoming highly polluted and also has reduced flows due to removal of its water for tar sand oil extraction. In many places, toxic tailing ponds are separated from the River by only a dike through which leakage is likely to occur. Initially, poorly designed research undertaken by industry and government failed to find evidence of tar sand pollution. Then in 2010, research undertaken by world-renowned scientist Dr. David Schindler showed elevated levels of carcinogenic heavy metals in the water. His research backed up years of personal observations from local fishermen who documented deformed fish in the Athabaska River. At one point, they collected over 200 kg of deformed fish for research but government scientists refused to collect them for study.

Pentland and Wood also describe one revealing incident in 2012, in the midst of yet another round of cutbacks in scientific staff that monitor water quality, in which the Conservative government abruptly terminated an ongoing study into the impact of fossil fuel development in the Athabaska-Mackenzie watershed. This study was not only halted; all the existing testimony and research gathered over the two previous years was ordered to be destroyed. I was shocked to learn our federal government has willfully destroyed evidence that taxpayers have paid to collect. What is our government trying to hide from its citizens? People who wish to learn more should read Pentland and Wood's book. It's now available at the Coquitlam Public Library.