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DISPATCHES FROM AFRICA

Reality Check: Water in Eastern Kenya

A story about water in Kenya and how the people are still suffering without it because of delayed rains in March and April.

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Most people in the first world can't even fathom how or why people could go without water in other parts of the world, since water seems so abundant and literally at their fingertips in much of Western society. But in the rural, rolling hills of eastern Kenya, water is literally the only thing keeping these people alive: more specifically rain water, since they rely on this for crop growth, washing, and drinking for themselves and their livestock. Water seems to burden the Duruma people everyday, and most of these Kenyan women spend the majority of both their mornings and nights fetching water at far away dams and surface pans.

The climate in this part of Kenya is described as semi-arid, but temperatures during the summer (the months of November-February) can easily reach over 100 degrees Fahrenheit with high levels of humidity. Since this part of Kenya is only three

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degrees south of the equator, after walking around mid-day only for a few minutes, you feel like you are walking on the surface of the sun. Not only are these months the scariest for Kenyans because of heat stroke and dehydration, but also because the stored water (from the rainy season of April, May and beginning of June) starts to diminish right before their eyes due to consumption, siltation and pollution. I've had the opportunity to live with these people during these trying months and the cleanest water I saw someone drink looked like someone dropped their pants, took a leak in a cup, stirred some dirt in for flavoring, and handed it back to the consumer. And this was the cleanest water I saw.

The most interesting dynamic, however, is the mindset of a person who has water always available to them, as opposed to the native who is scrambling day in and day out in order to obtain water. Unless you've seen it and lived amongst it, you cannot understand how badly this commodity cripples Kenyans, and they could no more understand your water-abundant life as they could grasp the fact that man has been to the moon and back. One of the many stories is from the village of Gona, where a woman sat down and told me in depth of how her village suffers from deprivation of water. This village is about 15 miles from Dzivani, and her entire village has been struggling with the security of this commodity for as long as she can remember. With the few surface pans in this village shared by both people and animals, Gona villagers are usually only water worry-free for two to three months out of the year, which is during the rainy season. When these local pans dry, near the middle of October, it is a grueling 14-kilometer walk in one direction to River Mwache, the biggest reserve water source in the area. Although this river is never completely dry, the walk

to get there takes up most of the day for the women who are required to fetch it, and even then the water still looks like the waste product of a few cows and goats.

Here in the states, how long would it take one of us to go get a drink? It probably wouldn't even be a matter of time for most of us, rather a matter of steps to the sink. Even if we had to walk outside to get the liquid, we could easily throw on a pair of sneakers to protect our feet so we wouldn't get hurt. In Duruma land, however, it takes on average a few hours to walk to the local water source to get a drink, and one sip of that water can and most likely will kill anyone who hasn't grown up on it. (Trust me, I have tried it and I highly discourage it.) Most of the women also don't have shoes, and haven't for years. The terrain in this part of Kenya is anything but inviting, and even in my thick, rubber-soled Vans I have had countless thorns shoot right through my shoe and into my foot like it was nothing. What about our families, do we get them a drink as well? Most of us could walk the extra fifteen feet to the fridge and grab a cup to fill it up, but without thinking to do so, we probably wouldn't. We also probably don't go into the bathroom, turn the shower on and test the temperature before one of our loved ones gets in to wash off, do we? The Kenyan women, however, fetch water both morning and night not only for themselves, but for their husband and children as well. That water is used for cooking, drinking, showering and whatever else they may need throughout the day.

Carrying water is a whole different story. When, how and where do we carry water when we need to in the states? Maybe when we fill up a bucket to wash our car and take it thirty feet to the driveway or if we need to transport large



coolers of water for sporting events we can easily throw it in our cars and off we go. But other than that, I can't remember the last time I saw someone in the states carrying a load of water by themselves from point A to B with the intention of keeping their family alive. Duruma women are not only experts at carrying water, but also extremely efficient at it. Using 20-liter plastic cans, they walk their distance to the water source, fill up their family can, and then throw it up on top of their heads. There is no help whatsoever by the arms, which allows the women to balance the water effortlessly on their heads without wearing out their shoulders. If you can find a spare minute during the day, fill up a large bucket at your house or box and try and balance it on your head. I don't care how big of a meat-head you are, either your neck will be on fire in seconds, or you will be wearing 20-liters of water all down your front and back.

Water is essential to survival and as we at CrossFit are working on ways to help the Kenyans get a constant, reliable water source, it's quite a reality check when we think about these types of differences that are on the other side of the world.

