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ANDREW REVKIN

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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.