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Groundwater Critical in Managing Climate Change Impacts

Groundwater is the world's largest store of freshwater, and the primary source of drinking water for nearly half the world's population.

With nearly 2½ billion people currently dependent on groundwater for their daily needs, it is surprising how little attention it gets.

Special Assistant to Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs Ambassador Chusei Yamada is attending the 5th Global Environment Facility (GEF) International Waters Conference being held in Cairns this week and explained that 97 per cent of the world's fresh water is located in aquifer systems.

"They are underground - out of sight and out of mind, and hence do not get the attention they deserve," he said.

Most aquifers are transboundary, which means they cross the borders of at least two countries. Through a joint project between UNESCO and GEF, a total of 273 transboundary aquifers have been identified around the globe.

"What this means in human terms is that most groundwater is shared, and in order to manage and share this water, political arrangements are necessary between the relevant nations," Ambassador Yamada said.

Scientist Alice Aureli says that groundwater can play a tremendous role in preventing terrible situations that will arise more frequently with climate change and agreed that much more attention needs to be paid to groundwater than has been in the past.

"Aquifers have an enormous storage capacity and can be replenished she said. "And the water quality is far superior to that in rivers and lakes."

The importance of groundwater is highlighted in Australia as the country faces severe water management challenges and groundwater aquifers are also under threat from overuse, salinisation and pollution.

"It is vital that the science and the laws regarding groundwater usage are on GEF's agenda. "As water shortages become more frequent, access to groundwater becomes more critical, Ms Aureli said.

Ambassador Yamada who is also a member of the UN International Law Commission said that 19 draft Articles of Law relating to groundwater were prepared last year and the aim is to finalise them by 2012.

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