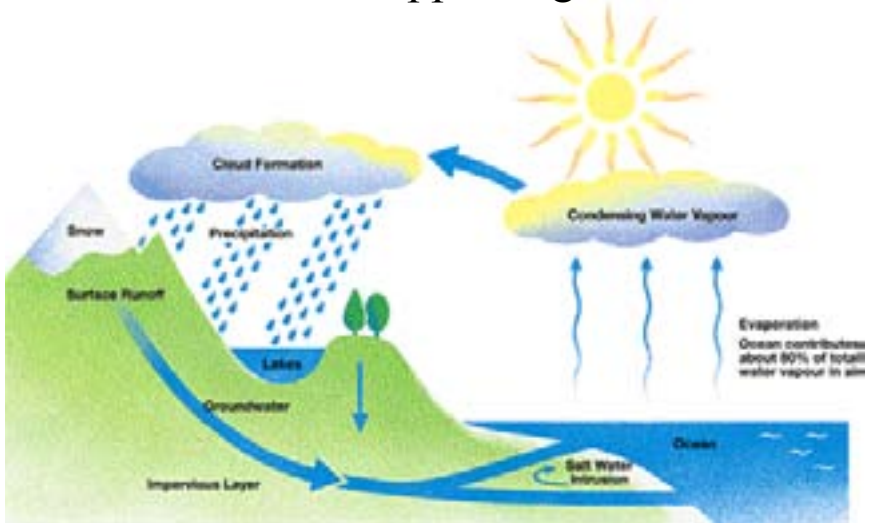


The Case of the Disappearing Water



The states in which water exists—solid, liquid, and gas—are often referred to as phases. Water is continuously being heated and cooled—evaporating, condensing, freezing—depending on its environmental circumstances. As water travels its never-ending cycle between earth and sky, it encounters and mixes with a variety of substances. Some of these substances are pollutants in the sense that they are harmful to living things. Pollution can result both from natural sources and human activities.

Fortunately, through the water cycle, nature provides a variety of mechanisms for cleaning water. For example, evaporation is a natural water cleanser. When water evaporates, it leaves most dissolved substances and waste materials behind. Pollutants can also be filtered out when water moves through soil. Some pollutants settle out in slow-moving water bodies. Nature even employs a host of microscopic organisms to help keep water clean. Unfortunately, however, if pollutants remain in the environment, clean water can easily become polluted all over again as it moves through its cycle.