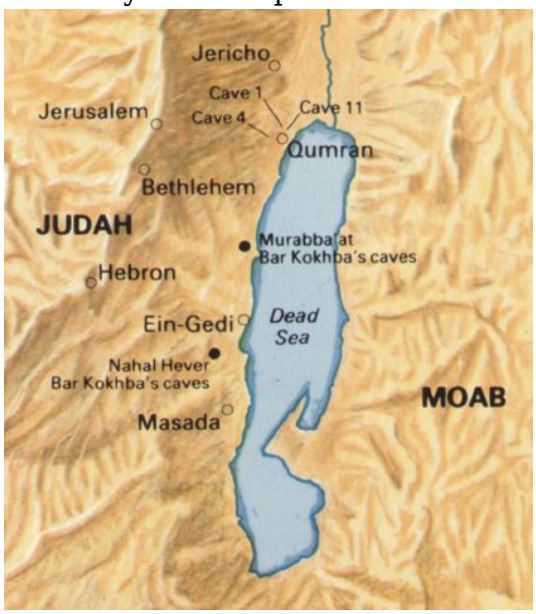
Can something that's Dead still be dying? It can if it's the Dead Sea and if it's rapidly disappearing. And it is.

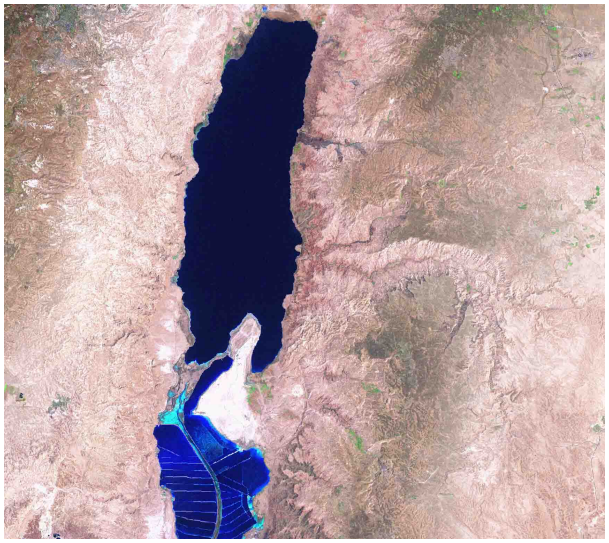
Check out this piece from this month's Scientific American, which details the disappearance of the Dead Sea — which is really a highly saline lake — due to four states (Israel, Jordan, Syria, and the Palestinian Authority (if that counts as a state)) drawing their freshwater supplies from its primary feeder, the Jordan River. How is this for a statistic:

> The sea is emptying primarily because influx from the Jordan River has dwindled from about 1,300 million cubic meters a year to 30 million cubic meters. As a result, evaporation in the sea outstrips freshwater supply; the southern lobe of the lake has disappeared.

No misprint: 1,300 million cubic meters to *30* million cubic meters. When I was growing up, we always saw map of the Dead Sea that looked like this:



Now, current pictures from space make it look like this:



That's not a southern lobe: instead, they are enormous, artificial cascading ponds pumped by Israeli and Jordanian potash companies to dislodge the valuable salts and potash from the lake bed, which are then harvested.

The Scientific American piece discusses a proposal to pump millions of gallons of salt water from the Strait of Tiran through the Negev desert into the Dead Sea: "Politicians," it says, "are testing whether either nation [Israel or Jordan] has the will to fund the $10 billion lifeline, as environmentalists oppose the pharonical project." I can see why they would: that would require an enormous amount of energy, and besides, we don't know how the two bodies of salt water would mix. But it's also not clear how else to save the Dead Sea: even if Israelis reduce their water consumption — and Israel has already pioneered a lot of water saving techniques — it's unrealistic and inhumane to expect, say, the Palestinians to do the same. They already use a lot less water than Israelis by Israeli government fiat.

This is an issue that will come up more and more, as many inland lakes, most notably the Aral Sea and the Caspian Sea, have been shrinking for years. The Aral Sea is a victim of climate change, but many other bodies of water are also victims of growing human thirst. Water will probably be the locus of the most vicious conflicts of the 21st century, and we should start dealing with it more seriously now.

In the meantime, the Scientific American piece includes a useful on-line slide show. Check it out.