

Bottled Up and Tapped Out

Why bottled water purity is a myth and reliance on bottled water is a threat

Exploiting the growing health-consciousness of consumers, some of the world's largest corporations have used extravagant advertising campaigns to convince people to pay exorbitant prices for water that is typically no safer than what pours from a tap at 1/1,000th the price. So that's a rip-off.

But the explosive growth in bottled water sales is not merely a clever marketing ploy conditioning consumers to pay more than they should for a product they don't need—Coke's version of the pet rock. Increasingly, the bottled water phenomenon depletes the world's already-stretched fresh water resources and degrades the environment through breakneck aquifer mining. And the more those who can afford bottled water depend on bottled water, the harder it is for communities to muster political and financial support for urgent upgrades to public water systems that most people depend on to provide safe, affordable water.

A lot of money...

A 1-liter bottle of water with a pretty picture of a moun-



Hundreds of thousands of tons of non-recycled plastic water bottles sit in landfills worldwide.

tain on the label can cost \$1 or more in a supermarket. One liter of water from a tap can cost consumers as little as one-tenth of a cent. The bottled water industry by some estimates does as much as \$10 billion worth of business each year.

...and a waste of money

Cash-strapped cities need to replace and expand aging, overburdened water and wastewater systems—and the cities are expected to fall about \$500 billion short over the next 20 years. Congress has been stingy, allocating just a little more than \$1 billion a year for water/wastewater systems. The rich often buy bottled water and ignore the decaying conditions of public water systems, leaving the disadvantaged to deal with their water source. All the money doled out for what often is no more than tap water in a handsomely packaged plastic bottle would be better spent guaranteeing safe, affordable water for all.

Bottled water is NOT safer

A landmark study by the Natural Resources Defense Council found approximately one-third of tested bottled water brands violated, in at least one sample, an enforceable standard or exceeded microbiological-purity guidelines. The most common contaminants were arsenic and synthetic organic carcinogens. The Food and Drug Administration regulates bottled water—IF the water is sold over state lines. That means as much as 70 percent of the bottled water sold in the U.S. is exempt from FDA regulations. In those instances where FDA regulations apply, the standards are not as rigorous as those applied to tap water by the Environmental Protection Agency. And the NRDC study found that testing of bottled water

facilities was less frequent and less rigorous than regulatory monitoring of municipal systems. For instance, a city water system will test for coliform bacteria several times a day, while a bottling plant need only test for coliform bacteria once a week.

Bottled water often IS tap water—or worse

Not only are bottled water labels pretty, they can be pretty misleading. Approximately 25 percent of bottled water is merely tap water. Rules allow manufacturers to call their product “spring water” even if it has been chemically treated. In one case in the NRDC test, water from an industrial parking lot next to a hazardous waste site was marketed as “spring water” from a pristine source.

Bottling water harms the environment

The water bottling industry profits from the sale of this common resource at the expense of the environment. Pumping can dry out springs, destroy habitats, devastate ecosystems, and drain aquifers. Additionally, hundreds of thousands of tons of non-recycled plastic water bottles sit in landfills worldwide. Less than 5-percent of the 40 billion pounds of plastic produced every year are actually recycled. Plastics are now the fastest growing sector of the waste stream and presently take up more than 25 percent of the volume of material sent to landfills every year.

Who are these swindlers?

NESTLE has 77 brands of water, including big sellers like Perrier, Poland Springs and San Pellegrino, and claims by some estimates as much as half the bottled water market in the U.S. Nestle has been hammered for questionable environmental practices in Michigan and other states, and was all but run out of Wisconsin for attempting to ramrod through a misguided water extraction scheme.

COCA-COLA gets your money when you buy popular brands of bottled water such as Dasani, Dannon and



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Money spent on handsomely-packaged bottled water would be better spent guaranteeing safe, affordable water for all.

Sparkletts, which Coke sells in the U.S. for the European conglomerate Group Danone. In India, Coca-Cola has been charged with causing water shortages in areas where its factories over-exploit groundwater resources. Coke recently incurred the wrath of the British public when it came to light that although Dasani was advertised as “pure” it was London tap water—Coke’s bottled water in the U.S. similarly is by and large local tap water. All of which just goes to show that when it comes to putting one over on the public, Coke is, in point of fact, the real thing.

PEPSI-CO sells the single most popular brand of bottled water in the U.S., Aquafina. If you’ve been lured to buy Aquafina by the soothing outline of a pristine mountain horizon on the label, you’ve taken the Pepsi challenge, and Pepsi won. Emulating its arch-nemesis Coke, Pepsi fills its water bottles not from remote mountain springs, but from the tap.

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