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The Crystal Clear Choice: Tap Water

Written by JEFF SOUTH Published: FRIDAY, 16 NOVEMBER 2007

The labels show ice-capped mountains, a palm-shrouded hibiscus or a deer's silhouette — outdoorsy images calculated to appeal to health-conscious consumers. Over the past decade, consumers have bought that image, as sales of bottled water tripled in the United States. Americans now drink more bottled water than milk or coffee.

But in recent months, the industry has found itself in troubled waters: Several environmental organizations and local government officials say bottled water represents a pollution threat to the environment — and money down the drain for consumers.

The pollution stems from making and transporting billions of plastic bottles of water. Environmentalists offer a slice of irony: By generating greenhouse gases, the bottled water industry endangers the very icy mountains evoked by the best-selling brands — because global warming "is melting those snowcaps and those glaciers," says Allen Hershkowitz, a senior scientist at the National Resources Defense Council.

Jennifer Gitlitz, the research director for the Container Recycling Institute, calls plastic bottles "the most environmentally egregious way to distribute water." Moreover, the empty bottles usually end up in landfills or as litter: Only one in seven single-serving water bottles is recycled.

Last summer, numerous cities told municipal employees to put the stopper on bottled water purchases in order to reduce waste. They included Los Angeles, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Ann Arbor, Mich., and Vancouver, Wash. The mayor of Salt Lake City even ordered firefighters to switch from bottled water to refillable 10-ounce containers.

Government officials want to change citizens' drinking habits as well. New York launched a \$700,000 marketing campaign urging residents to opt for tap water over bottled water. "Cool. Healthy. Clean. Zero sugar. Zero calories," an ad declared. "NYC Water. Get your fill."

And get it cheap: If you drink a half-gallon of tap water a day, you'd pay about 50 cents for the entire year; the equivalent amount of bottled water could cost \$1,400. Not only that, blind taste-tests show consumers often can't tell the difference between bottled water and municipal water, and will even select tap water as tasting better than the bottled variety.

In October, the Sierra Club and other groups took that theme nationwide. The coalition, led by Corporate Accountability International, is calling on Americans to "think outside the bottle." The campaign asks consumers to sign a pledge to choose tap water instead of bottled water.

The bottled water industry has splashed back. "I think it's unfortunate there is now this 'tap water versus bottled water' controversy," said Joseph Doss, president of the International Bottled Water Association. "We don't see it that way. I don't think



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consumers are replacing tap water with bottled water. We make a food product. We see other food products as our competitors."

He says consumers "choose bottled water as an alternative to other packaged beverages when they want to avoid or moderate calories, caffeine, sugar, artificial flavors or colors, alcohol and other ingredients."

The industry has a point: Bottled water is a more responsible choice than other bottled beverages. Moreover, compared with the environmental impact of other products, plastic water bottles are a drop in the bucket: They make up less than one-third of 1 percent of U.S. trash.

Americans spent about \$11 billion on bottled water in 2006, more than any other country. That works out to more than 27 gallons per American. But nine countries consume more bottled water per capita: On average, Italians annually drink 51 gallons of bottled water per person; in the United Arab Emirates and Mexico, it's about 48 gallons.

As the trade association notes, tap water is unsafe in some countries — and during emergencies like Hurricane Katrina. (In its defense, the industry even waves the flag of patriotism, saying bottled water was critical during the 9/11 terrorist attacks.)

But many of the bottled water industry's bullet points don't hold water. Most bottled water is consumed where tap water is fine. A plastic bottle of "designer water" has become a lifestyle accessory — conferring status as much as quenching thirst.

The cumulative effect of shipping water thousands of miles — from Fiji to New York, for example — is significant, and unnecessary. "Nearly a quarter of all bottled water crosses national borders to reach consumers," says Emily Arnold, a researcher at the Earth Policy Institute.

Manufacturing contributes to the industry's carbon footprint. Arnold calculates that it takes 1.5 million barrels of oil a year to make the plastic bottles for the water Americans drink. That's enough oil to generate electricity for 250,000 homes or fuel 100,000 cars a year.

It is consumers who have turned bottled water into a daily companion and made it the number three beverage in America, behind soft drinks and beer. Ultimately, it will be consumers who decide whether to buy one last bottle of bottled water — and refill it themselves from the faucet.

Jeff South is a journalism professor and environmental writer.

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