

Bottled Water



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*This 10-foot tall
cube of crushed
water bottles was
made by sculptor
Steven Siegel.*

BACKLASH

By Melissa Knopper

Jennifer Phillips always felt guilty that her large Nashville law firm didn't recycle. So after big client meetings, she collected all the empty plastic water bottles, took them home and added them to her own curbside recycling bin. Now, she is proud to report that her firm, Bass, Berry & Sims, serves an icy pitcher of tap water during meetings. "We even have glasses with the company logo on them," she says. Phillips estimates switching to tap keeps 3,000 plastic water bottles per week out of the landfill.

It's a trend that is taking hold in the U.S., Europe and Canada: more people are switching from bottled water to tap. Call it reverse snob appeal. Bottled water once carried a certain European mystique. But these days, it's the tap water enthusiasts, concerned about the environment, who get to act self-righteous. Just like it has become cool to bring your own cloth bags to the grocery store and your own mug to the coffee shop, the reusable water bottle is the hip, new eco accessory.

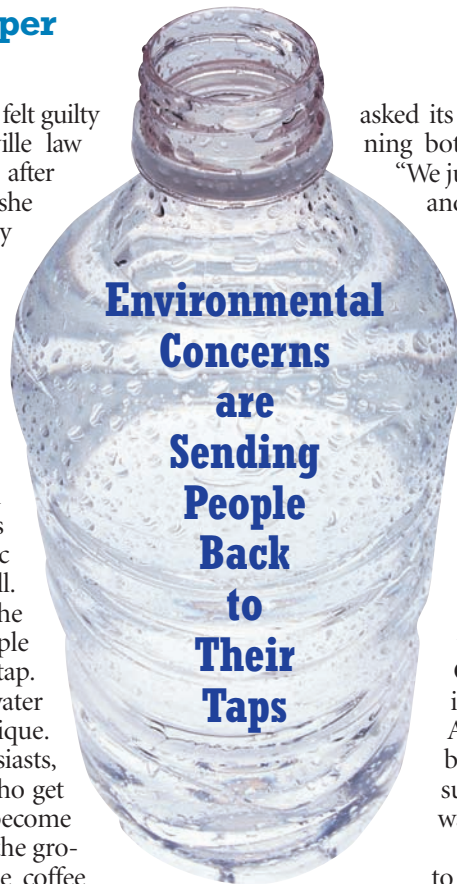
It's because people like Phillips and David Wilk, a Connecticut book publisher and tap water activist, have started to connect the dots. For Wilk, it happened on the soccer field. After his sons finished their games, he noticed the grass was littered with bottled water and Gatorade empties. Pretty soon, Wilk started showing up with a huge container of tap water. Now all the kids bring their own bottles and fill up when thirsty.

"We have such a consumption mentality, which leads to our throw-away society," says Wilk, who started the website Turntotap.com to build more support for public water supplies and to cut down on the amount of plastic going into landfills. "I think the cost of our behavior should be built into the products," Wilk says.

A Gathering Revolt

In Canada, the bottled water issue has become, as Wilk says, an "uprising." College students are staging protests—declaring "bottled water-free zones" on campus. High school activists are raising questions about why their school board members are locking them into a contract with Coke or Pepsi (makers of Aquafina and Dasani bottled water) when they have access to drinking fountains for free. Some students have jokingly started to sell bottled air for \$1.

In an even bolder move, the United Church of Canada



asked its three million members to consider banning bottled water during meetings and events.

"We just had a lot of concerns about governance and accountability," says Julie Graham, who leads the anti-bottled water campaign for a Toronto ecumenical activist group called Kairos. "Why is it people in Canada are willing to pay twice as much for bottled water as for gasoline? We started challenging that and raising questions about billions of empty bottles going into landfills."

Others, like Richard Girard, a corporate researcher for the Ottawa-based Polaris Institute, don't like the hypocrisy they perceive in the bottled water marketing. "This movement is gaining momentum because the general public is starting to figure out bottled water is a scam," says Girard. More than half of all bottled water is simply filtered tap anyway, he argues. And some of it is actually worse in quality because bottled water companies aren't subject to the same strict oversight as public water supplies.

"We want the bottled water corporations to be held accountable for their actions," Girard says. "These companies are essentially commodifying water. We hope we can force them to change and be more environmentally responsible."

The trend away from bottled water also ties in with the Slow Food movement—as the restaurant industry tries to support local agriculture and cut down on extravagant energy used to ship imported foods from around the world. At Berkeley's Chez Panisse, general manager Mike Kossa-Rienzi had his "a-ha" moment when he sat down and calculated how far the 25,000 bottles of sparkling Italian spring water he ordered had to travel through the air. "It really does not make sense to ship from all around the world when you have such good water in your backyard," he says. "You have to think about the carbon imprint you're making there."

Another big push for the bottled water backlash came during World Water Day 2007, when San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom declared a ban on bottled water contracts for all city departments. Instead of bottled water vending machines, he installed large dispensers in city buildings that poured out pure tap water from the Sierra mountains. Other cities, from Chicago to Salt Lake, followed suit.

Just think about a bottled water brand like Fiji, says Wilk. On the company's website, it says, "When it comes to drinking water, remote is very, very good." If you think about it, Wilk says, it's pretty arrogant to ask that Fiji water be flown 8,000 miles across the world just so North American yuppies can enjoy a slightly better taste. ▶

Responding to rising criticism, the company launched the “Fiji Green” campaign. It partnered with Conservation International to go carbon negative, reduced packaging, committed to 100 percent recycled materials and has pledged money to protect the Sovi Basin rainforest in Fiji. A cynic would say the company is doing this because it can afford to—marketing Fiji water is an enormously profitable enterprise.

Bottled Waste

It takes 15 million barrels of oil per year to make all of the plastic water bottles in America, according to the Container Recycling Institute. Sending those bottles by air and truck uses even more fossil fuel.

Once people drain the bottles, they rarely recycle them because they’re often purchased at big concert venues or airports with no recycling bins. CRI says eight out of 10 water bottles end up in the landfill. The bottles that drift from landfills and litter streams are washing out to sea to form a huge raft of plastic debris in the center of the Pacific that is twice the size of Texas.

It takes 1,000 years for plastic bottles to break down,

CRI estimates. But when they do, they disintegrate into tiny bits. The green and blue bottles, especially, look like tasty food to fish and shorebirds. Scientists are finding these dead animals on the beach, with bellies full of plastic pellets.

If more states added deposits on bottled water bottles, it might spur recycling. Congressman Ed Markey (D-MA) has even proposed a national beverage bottle bill. But PET water bottles (short for polyethylene terephthalate) can only be recycled a few times. What about going back to refillable glass bottles? For one thing, they are heavy to ship. And Zero Waste expert Neil Seldman of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance doesn’t imagine anyone could persuade the beverage industry to go that route.

“They have always lobbied against it,” Seldman says. “The industry does not want to deal with it after people buy their product—they want to wash their hands of the containers.” That’s why it makes the most sense to avoid creating the waste in the first place by drinking tap from your own container, Seldman says.

Meanwhile, as drought spreads to North Carolina and



Selling Tap Water

Challenged to create a brand out of “nothing” by *Esquire* magazine, David Droga of New York ad agency Droga5 envisioned the Tap Project. The concept was simple, but the scope huge: charge New York City diners a dollar for their glasses of tap water during one week in March (dubbed “World Water Week”) and give that money to UNICEF to help provide access to clean drinking water around the world. Ads for the Tap Project, launched in 2007 with 300 New York restaurants, showed tap water as a prestige beverage in designer bottles. After all, one billion people around the world do not have access to the “luxury” of clean drinking water. “All of us take for granted the ability to get clean water through the tap,” says Kim Pucci, marketing director for U.S. Funds for UNICEF. Asked about bottled water companies’ claims that cast doubt on the safety of tap water, Pucci says, “We’re staying out of the debate.”

The Tap Project, which raised \$100,000 its first year, expanded to more than a dozen cities this year and 2,300 restaurants.



Lucy Liu visits a village on the Ivory Coast with UNICEF, where young girls spend their days transporting contaminated well water to their homes.

The Project has a hip aura, with videos on YouTube, and celebrity endorsements from actors like Sarah Jessica Parker and Lucy Liu. It’s UNICEF’s most successful initiative to date, even surpassing the charitable response to the Southeast Asian tsunami.

Just \$1 can supply 10.5 gallons of safe drinking water to one child (enough for 40 days worth of water for cooking, bathing and cleaning). The project’s continued expansion—it aims to go worldwide next year—will help UNICEF reach its goal of halving the number of people without access to safe drinking water by 2015.

And other advertisers are challenging consumer ambivalence toward water, particularly in bottled form. Last year, Eric Yaverbaum of PR firm Ericho Communications and Mark DiMassimo of DiMassimoGoldstein (or DIGO) founded Tapping, a project pushing consumers to switch from bottled water to reusable bottles filled with tap water. They’re selling their own refillables with messages like “Think global. Drink local.”

CONTACTS: The Tap Project, (800)4UNICEF, www.taproject.org; Tapping, www.tapping.com. **E**
—Brita Belli

Atlanta, residents are casting a suspicious eye on beverage companies like Coca Cola, which tap into local aquifers to fill their bottles. Nestle has been seeking environmental approval for what would be the largest water bottling plant in the U.S.—one million square feet in McCloud, California—against community protests. The company has had to significantly increase the amount it's paying for the water (from \$26 an acre-foot to \$183) and limit its draw to 520 million gallons annually. It's still battling opposition from residents concerned about the mega-plant's effects on quality of life and outdoor recreation.

Bottled water industry groups, such as the International Bottled Water Association, say they are being unfairly targeted. They argue bottled water is a healthy alternative to sugary soda. And it can also be a lifesaver when disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, strike. "It's not really a bottled water vs. tap water world," says IBWA spokesman Steven Kay. "Most people drink both. We think bottled water provides a good healthy choice."

But industry marketing firms have had to do an about-face. "What's interesting about the backlash," says CRI Executive Director Betty McLaughlin, "is that the companies say 'drink our water, not tap water.' Now people are going back to tap and they've got to reposition themselves." Companies are trying every angle, from claims of superior filtration to adding antioxidants (Snapple) and fruity flavors (Dasani and others).

Don't Refill that Bottle!

The IBWA argues that bottled water companies are responding to environmental concerns by making lighter bottles that require less plastic in the manufacturing process. Kay says the industry does invest significant money to improve access to recycling at large public venues, such as airports and concert halls. Companies like Nalgene, Sigg and Brita are aggressively marketing their refillable bottles and home filters as a more responsible option.

When it comes to reusable bottles, however, consumers still need to do their homework. Research shows that clear bottles made of polycarbonate plastic (such as the original 32-ounce Nalgene) can leach bisphenol-A (BPA). This is an endocrine-disrupting chemical that acts like estrogen in the body. BPA essentially tricks your body into thinking it's estrogen, says Washington State University Researcher Patricia Hunt. She discovered the dangers of BPA when some of her polycarbonate mouse cages started to leach BPA, causing infertility in female mice.

Since BPA has been linked to low sperm counts and an

High Water Marks



Online calculators are the latest thing in eco-land: a quick way to gauge one's wasteful footprint against the consumption level of other Americans. The newest addition is H2O Conserve, a joint project between Food & Water Watch and other nonprofits. The site leads users through a series of personal questions—their home state, the number of people in their household, how they shower, wash dishes and maintain lawns and cars. Using national averages, the calculator determines individual "water footprints." While the number isn't scientifically accurate, even its approximation can be alarming—most Americans use more than 1,000 gallons a day, according to the site's measures. CONTACT: www.h2oconserve.org.

—Brita Belli

increased risk of breast and prostate cancer, scientists like vomSaal and Hunt suggest avoiding reusable bottles made from plastic. They also raise serious concerns about the potential for other plastic chemicals to leach out of typical PET water bottles—especially if they sit in the hot sun.

Hunt uses a stainless bottle brand called Klean Kantene, and Wilk's website sells stainless guaranteed-not-to-leach SIGG bottles made in Switzerland. The trend away from bottled water may also boost sales of home filters. Water-quality experts say most tap water is fine to drink straight from the faucet—especially in cities like San Francisco, Seattle, New York City and Denver, where water comes from pristine mountain reservoirs. But in places that draw drinking water from lakes and rivers with sewer outfalls, it might make sense to install a filter. Sometimes rusty pipes or naturally occurring iron can also affect the taste.

It makes sense for anyone turning back to tap to become educated about the local public water supply. And since the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requires frequent water quality reports, the data is easy to find. The Environmental Working Group (EWG) makes it easy with its Tap Water Database. You can plug in your zip code and find out whether your local water system is up to par.

Now that more people are trying get out of the bottled water habit, groups like Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and EWG wonder if this new awareness will translate into more support for public water supplies, and for water conservation in general.

Once you kick the bottle, they say, the next step is to get educated and get involved—find out what your water system needs and start pushing your elected officials to bring more funds to bear on the problem. According to NRDC, the EPA has asked for billions of dollars for a public water supply needs assessment. But the Bush Administration has allocated only a small portion of that request, says NRDC attorney Mae Wu.

"People are very concerned about what's in their water because we drink so much of it," says Jane Houlihan, EWG's vice president for research. "We're advocating for more protection for the waters that are the source of what comes out of kitchen faucets."

CONTACTS: Container Recycling Institute, (202)263-0999, www.container-recycling.org; EWG, (202)667-6982, www.ewg.org/tapwater; Institute for Local Self-Reliance, (202)898-1610, www.ilsr.org; Turn to Tap, www.turnto tap.com. **E**

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