

The case against bottled water

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The case against bottled water Canadians need to stop and think about the serious consequences of their water choice From the Toronto Star, August 11, 2008

Canadians have long been proud of the mighty rivers and beautiful lakes that make this country one of the greatest repositories of fresh water on the planet. So, it's a sad statement about our society that we are increasingly choosing to drink bottled water, often from foreign companies.

A recent Statistics Canada study found that three in 10 Canadian households used bottled water as their main source of drinking water in 2006. The study results are surprising, as there are so many good reasons to avoid drinking bottled water.

Many Canadians buy bottled water because they think it's safer and healthier than tap water. Certainly, advertising by bottled water companies — dominated by images of pristine glaciers and mountain streams — leaves consumers with that impression. The reality is that Canada's water supply — with rare exceptions — is extremely safe. Furthermore, according to Health Canada, there is no evidence to support the belief that bottled water is any safer than tap water. Indeed, if anything, our tap water may well be safer and healthier than bottled varieties.

The municipal water supply is more stringently tested than bottled water supplies. In Canada, the CBC reports that local water supplies are inspected every day while bottled-water plants are inspected just once every three years. In addition, according to MSN news, water-bottling plants are required to test for coliform bacteria just once a week whereas most municipal water systems test for the bacteria several times a day.

Consumers should also consider the safety and health risks posed by the bottles themselves. Many plastic water bottles are made using the chemical polyethylene terephthalate or PET. A recent study by Dr. William Shotyk, the Canadian director of the Institute of Environmental Geochemistry at the University of Heidelberg, found PET bottles leach a dangerous toxin called antimony into the water they contain. The study found that the levels of antimony rise the longer water stays in the bottle.

Before reaching for bottled water, Canadians need to think about the serious environmental consequences of their water choice. These include: release of millions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere from manufacturing, transport and marketing, which contributes to global warming; depletion of scarce energy and water resources; release of toxic chemicals into our air, land and water; and absorption of poisons into the food chain.

According to the Pacific Institute, the energy required to produce plastic water bottles for the American market alone in 2006 was equivalent to more than 17 million barrels of oil and created 2.5 million tons of carbon dioxide.

Producing bottles consumes a huge amount of water too, with the Pacific Institute estimating it takes three litres of water to produce one litre of bottled water.

It also takes energy to fill the bottles; ship them by truck, train, boat or plane to the consumer; refrigerate them; and recover, recycle or dispose of the empty bottles. The Pacific Institute estimates the total amount of energy used to provide a bottle of water to the consumer could be equal to filling 25 per cent of that bottle with oil.

Unfortunately, most empty bottles — more than 85 per cent according to the David Suzuki Foundation — are thrown into the trash. These bottles don't just disappear — they either get buried in the landfill or they're incinerated. The buried bottles take up to 1,000 years to biodegrade and may leak toxic additives into the groundwater. The incinerated bottles release toxic chemicals into our air. Moreover, some of the bottles make their way into our oceans, where they break down into increasingly tiny pieces, and can enter the food chain when they're eaten by marine animals and birds.

The economics of bottled water are as startling as the health and environmental considerations. While we don't tend to think of it in this way, buying bottled water is an incredibly expensive habit: a bottle of water costs more than a litre of gasoline. If we buy a bottle a day for a toonie from the vending machine, we're spending more than \$700 a year on water.

What's more, bottled water is an example of price gouging at its most outrageous. More than one-quarter of the bottled water consumed by Canadians is nothing more than filtered tap water. Two of the top-selling brands in Canada are Dasani, which is owned by Coca-Cola, and Aquafina, which is owned by its beverage rival PepsiCo.

As Pepsi was forced to admit last year, both brands take the water they bottle directly from municipal water systems; Dasani uses water from Calgary and Brampton taps while Aquafina uses tap water from Vancouver and Mississauga.

Shocking, isn't it? These companies are taking our tap water, which on average in Canada costs us less than one-tenth of a cent per litre, filtering it, although it is already perfectly clean, and selling it back to us at a markup that can be

several thousand times its original price.

What's perhaps even more galling is that not only is the consumer paying exorbitant prices for filtered tap water but the taxpayer is also heavily subsidizing these companies on the back end by allowing them to draw water from municipal systems that were built with their tax monies.

From a marketing perspective, bottled water is unquestionably one of the great success stories of modern times. However, from a social, environmental and economic perspective, the success of bottled water has created a myriad of problems.

Responding to these problems, governments, universities, schools, companies and restaurants around the country have stopped buying and selling bottled water. They are thinking before they drink. You can too.