

[The Compelling Costs of Bottled Water - Price Point Too High for Environment and Individuals](#)

Americans are appalled at the rising cost of gasoline that topped \$4 a gallon in May. Yet, we think nothing of paying \$9 a gallon for bottled water. To make the comparison even more perplexing consider that gasoline, for most people, is essential to everyday living while bottled water is optional, usually unnecessary and generally troublesome for an already troubled environment.

Turn on the Tap

According to the Think Outside the Bottle campaign, Americans are the world's top consumers of bottled water while, ironically, the U.S. has one of the safest public water systems on the planet. So, why did the bottled water craze take the nation by storm? Some experts say it began as small status symbol, mimicking the bottled waters popular in France and Italy. But, as the sources of water changed and companies such as Coca Cola and Nestle entered the game, bottled water spilled over from simply posh to popular.

Too popular, according to nonprofit groups and environmental organizations. Americans spend a combined \$11.7 billion annually on bottled water. The Container Recycling Institute (CRI) estimates that every person in the U.S. tosses 160 plastic bottles in the trash each year - or 8 out of every 10 bottles purchased. Given the preciousness of oil in the current economic climate, it's also important to note that CRI says it takes 15 million barrels of oil per year to make plastic bottles for America's bottled water addiction.

The Cost of Convenience

The convenience of bottled water has certainly added to its popularity. Think of Little League games, public events, road trips and that handy bottle at your desk. But now, as people become more aware of the environmental downsides of plastic containers and the questionable value of bottled water compared to tap water or filtered tap water, the tide may be turning.

A number of cities have ceased the once popular practice of providing bottled water for employees. In San Francisco, Mayor Gavin Newsom observed World Water Day in 2007 by canceling all the city's bottled water contracts. Chicago and Salt Lake City followed suit. The popular Austin City Limits Music Festival stopped providing bottled water to its legion of volunteers and rewarded patrons who recycled bottles with a special T-shirt.

The world renown Chez Panisse in Berkeley calculated the carbon footprint of the bottles of sparkling water it imported from Italy and removed the bubbly from the menu. And, in Canada, a movement is sweeping the land. Students in colleges and high schools are protesting contracts with Coca-Cola and Pepsi for their bottled waters. The students are lapping up free, fresh water from school drinking fountains instead.

Questions of Quality

As bottled waters attract increased scrutiny, public water systems are measured against them for both cost and water quality. The cost factor is extremely compelling. A bottle of water costs a dollar and often more, depending upon the brand. Water from the tap costs about \$0.00002 per ounce. If a city's tap water is unpalatable due to chlorine treatment or other sanitizing chemicals, even the addition of a water filter to a faucet gets gallons of water for pennies a day.

Water quality is also variable in both bottled waters and public water supplies. According to the EPA, bottled water is not necessarily safer than water that flows from the tap. In fact, some bottled water is no more than treated (or untreated) tap water. Consumers are advised to read the label on bottled waters to learn the source and the method of treatment. More in-depth questions have to be addressed to the manufacturer. In contrast, specific information about public water systems, water quality and treatment are publicly available on the EPA's website. The Environmental Working Group also has a tap water database where people can look up water quality and content by zip code.

Well Into the Future

But, the most compelling concern about water in plastic bottles is environmental. The Container Recycling institute says the amount of polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic bottles being recycled reached 1,170 million pounds in 2005 while the amount of PET bottles ending up in landfills reached 3,900 million pounds. That number includes some other beverages in PET containers but the institute says water bottles are the biggest problem. Many states offer no redemption incentives on water bottles and the plain, usually sugarless drink is just so popular.

Plastic water bottles in landfills do not rest in peace. They drift or are blown into other areas such as the Pacific Ocean where, according to CRI, they form a messy, toxic mass that is twice the size of Texas. It takes about 1,000 years for a plastic bottle to degrade into tiny pieces that, to fish and birds, often look like food. There is also increasing evidence that PET bottles and other plastic bottles may be a threat to human health.

Consumer Choice

So, what is a water-lover to do? First, the EPA and other experts advise giving your tap water a try. Some municipal systems, such as the one serving

San Francisco, pour forth with crystal clear water from the High Sierra. Other communities, where there is heavy agricultural or industrial activity, may not be so fortunate. When contaminants and lead might be present, public systems use a variety of techniques to make drinking water safe. They are regulated by the EPA and frequent testing is federally mandated. That is to say the tap water is safe, but may not be taste tempting.

There are many effective filtering products on the market from faucet mounted filters to pitchers and filtered water dispensers. These devices remove contaminants and pollutants while improving the taste of water. They are quite affordable and provide families with assurance about the quality of water they use for drinking and cooking.

Once the source issue is solved, people will still want the convenience of portability. There is an increasing marketplace of containers for water, from personal water bottles made of reusable aluminum, stainless steel, ceramic and traditional glass. As awareness of the health dangers and environmental downside of plastic bottles spreads, a market-driven demand will result in even more choices for people who want fresh water at their side, wherever they may roam.

About the Author

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