

Millions Shun Tapwater

Bottled Water Madness

BY LARRY LACK

The bottled water industry is a prime example of why P.T. Barnum, not Adam Smith, should be anointed as capitalism's patron saint. Aside from its usefulness in remote areas during disasters and emergencies, bottled water is an entirely needless affectation. The fears about the safety of public water supplies that its purveyors play on are exaggerated nonsense. But the enormous global bottled water industry built on these false fears undercuts public water, disfigures landscapes, and exposes trusting bottled water consumers to serious health risks.

Hyped by label and advertising images of mountain crags and crystal streams, single serving bottles of plain water (and their flavored and mineral or vitamin-enriched variations) are an omnipresent feature of modern life. Bottled water is less a commodity than a fashion trend. Its hucksters have used advertising to transform their mundane products into icons of health, fitness, youth and beauty, their pushers would have us think, from pristine springs.

In 1990, about two billion gallons of bottled water were sold worldwide. By 2003 more than 30 billion gallons were consumed and sales, which in that year topped \$35 billion, have continued to rise. Tens of millions of consumers now shun tap water and rely on bottled water exclusively. For this dubious privilege, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), they pay between 240 and 10,000 times the price of tap water – including ten to fifteen cents per bottle to cover the cost of advertising. Surprisingly, despite all the current outrage over the price of gasoline, most North American consumers are casually forking over more for bottled water – about a buck a quart – than they are for gas.

Approximately one fourth of all bottled water and as much as 40 per cent of that sold in North America is simply municipal tap water run through filters and treated with minerals or other additives. The rest of the bottled water found in stores is pumped from groundwater aquifers many of which have been severely depleted by these water “takings”.

Safety testing of bottled water is

seldom required or done, but published studies indicate that heavy metals and other toxic chemicals as well as health threatening bacteria are found with surprising frequency in bottled water which, ironically, is marketed based on claims of “purity”. Both chemical and bacterial contaminations tend to increase when water is stored in sealed bottles for long periods of time.

Bacteria can get through filtering systems, and, if they are not well managed, these systems themselves may contaminate the water they are meant to purify. A comprehensive 2004 Dutch study found that 40 per cent of 68 commercial mineral waters tested were contaminated with either bacteria or fungi. The study's author warned that bacteria in bottled water

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could threaten the health of consumers with compromised immune systems and called for more effective regulation of bottled water. A 1993 study published in the *Canadian Journal of Microbiology* and a follow-up study in 1998 found that nearly 40 per cent of the samples of bottled water sold in Canada from 1981 through 1997 contained bacteria in excess of applicable safety standards.

Bottled water is responsible for an enormous increase in world production of plastic bottles. Surging sales of bottled water coincided with and may help account for a 56 per cent increase in U.S. plastic resin manufacture in the U.S.A. between 1995 and 2001 (from 32 million tons to over 50 million tons annually). Consuming critical supplies of petroleum and natural gas, plastic bottle factories create and release toxic wastes, including benzene, xylene, and oxides of ethylene into the environment. Toxic and carcinogenic constituents of plastic bottles, such as the phthalates that are used to make

some containers flexible, can contaminate their contents during transportation or storage.

In virtually every part of the world discarded water bottles have become a major component of roadside litter. They also swell landfills and release hazardous toxins into air and water when they are burned in backyard barrels or industrial incinerators. Despite the deliberately misleading circled arrows displayed on water bottles, in most places where they are sold single service bottled water containers are neither recycled nor returnable for refunds.

This unsettling information, and a great deal more, is found in a wide-ranging overview of the bottled water business, *In the Bottle, An Exposé of the Bottled Water Industry* (Polaris Institute, Ottawa, 2005). Thanks to its focus on the consequences of treating water as a commodity, *In the Bottle* is being used as a study and action guide by environmental and political groups in Canada, including the Council of Canadians and Kairos, Canada's net-

work of progressive Christians. Authored by the director of the Polaris Institute, Tony Clarke, this initial edition of *In the Bottle* is offered as an early step in what seems to be a long-range strategy. At the end of each chapter Clarke solicits local information and suggestions from readers by posing questions and requesting email feedback.

In the Bottle includes these additional well-documented (no pun intended) facts about the worldwide boom in bottled water:

Nearly one-fifth of North Americans use bottled water exclusively for their daily hydration. Canadians consume more bottled water than coffee, tea, apple juice or milk. In the past two decades bottled water sales have exploded and now far surpass sales of soft drinks and nearly all other sources of revenue for the beverage and food conglomerates that dominate the bottled water business.

Four companies – two based in the

U.S.A., Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, and two in Europe, Nestlé and Danone (the makers of Dannon yogurt) – account for most worldwide sales of bottled water. Nestlé's bottled water brands, including Perrier, Poland Springs, Pure Life, Calistoga and a dozen others, and Danone's Evian, Crystal and other brands, are pumped from natural aquifers in many countries, sometimes resulting in dry wells, regional water shortages, and major protests.

Pepsi's Aquafina (North America's best selling bottled water) and Coke's Dasani are filtered and/or "re-mineralized" municipal tap water. To complicate the corporate picture, under a licensing agreement Coke also markets several of Danone's brands of water, including Evian and Sparkletts, in North America

Bottled water ads, product label language and illustrations are often egregiously misleading. For example, according to the Polaris report, Alaska Premium Glacier bottled water "is drawn from the municipal water system in Juneau, Alaska, specifically, pipe # 111241, which is not a glacier".

In the U.S.A. and Canada, bottled water is subject to far less rigorous testing than tap water. North America's hundreds of water bottling plants (an *In the Bottle* appendix lists 70 of these with their sources of water and the brands they produce) are monitored by public health officials whose numbers are minute. Quoting a 1999 Natural Resources Defense Council report (*Bottled Water: Pure Drink or Pure Hype?*), the Polaris report notes that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's bottled water regulatory and safety assurance staff then consisted of less than two full-time positions.

As a result, most water bottling plants in the U.S.A. are inspected only about once every five or six years. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency manages to inspect Canada's water bottlers, on average, every three years.

Yet bottled water ad campaigns encourage consumers to question the safety of public tap water, which in developed countries is constantly monitored and held to strict standards that many bottled waters could not meet.

In addition to exposing the pattern of irresponsible practices of the big four players in the bottled water business, *In the Bottle* makes a compelling case for keeping public water public. It also informs its readers on the pitiful employment record

of the \$12 billion North American bottled water behemoth, which in 2002 provided just 6,709 mostly low-wage jobs.

As this report for community water activists recounts the damage done by bottled water – including depletion of agricultural aquifers and pesticide contamination of water sold in India (Coke) and subcontracting for slave labor in Burma (Pepsi) – it tempers outrage with accounts of successful educational campaigns and models for corrective action drawn from the home front in the U.S.A. and Canada.

While the report includes lots of useful graphs, pages of footnotes and supporting statistics from many sources, the cascade of information packed into *In the Bottle* cries out for an index. This one defect aside, the Polaris report offers readers ready access to bottled water basics in a magazine-style format that's lively and engaging. Combined with its unique distribution strategy of motivating and empowering community groups, *In the Bottle* may reach and inspire enough readers to produce some useful changes in how communities in North America relate to the water that most of us still take for granted.

In the Bottle's concluding chapter highlights promising measures – mostly requiring effective regulation by government – for reducing the health risks and environmental damage caused by the excesses of the bottled water juggernaut.

Apart from the obvious step we all can take by staying off bottled water ourselves [we were never on it, Editors] and encouraging others to do so, first among the sensible policies *In the Bottle* recommends is adequate funding for rebuilding public water infrastructure.

Future editions of the Polaris report should include an account of the quirky but determined Water Liberation Movement in Germany. Its adherents, after calculating that more than one per cent of Europe's surface waters had been "locked in bottles", invaded supermarkets and convenience stores in groups and poured all the bottled water they could grab into drains, green strips and gutters on the streets outside.

Their hope was that the water they were "liberating" from those bottles would recharge the desiccated water cycle and be on tap to slake the thirst of prodigal humanity while coursing non-commercially to the sea. CP

Eros and Militarization

By CHRISTOPHER REED

The sexiest schoolgirls in the world parade down Japanese town and village streets every weekday after class in their micro-mini skirts, exposing tanned legs that are never sheathed in hose, no matter how cold.

The young women (the ones referred to are mostly 16-18) display an ingenuity their adult masters never dreamed of when they adapted the nation's uniforms in the 19th century from military models.

Boys were pushed into constricted, brass-buttoned, high-collared, dark blue tunics and peaked caps borrowed from the Prussian army. The girls were given British sailor collars, complete with the three white bars for Nelson's greatest victories, and these were dark blue, although now skirts are often plaid. The boys soldier on in their outfits, although they are disappearing. But the girls have transformed theirs.

They are known as "kogals" from "gal" and "ko" meaning either little, or a shortened version of "koko", or high school. Their emergence in the mid-1990s electrified onlookers. They sported dyed hair, sometimes almost blonde, garish cos-

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