

Musing on bottled water



It's a long way from Fiji to the Rockies

Longer ago than I care to remember everyone drank from the kitchen faucet and, in summer, the outside hose. If anyone had told me that in the future people would be buying water in bottles I'd have thought it a hoax rivaling the pan of stringy goo that passed for the "man-eating octopus" I paid 10 cents to see at a local carnival sideshow.

Granted we've learned a lot about what's in our drinking water (see Flint, Michigan), but the very idea that today consumers pay billions of dollars for water in plastic bottles – water sometimes no better than average tap water – still confounds me. And the environmental cost of this luxury is astounding.

Consider one of today's premium bottled waters – Fiji. The label on its distinctly shaped bottle touts that the water "slowly filters through ancient volcanic rock" and "gathers vital minerals that give Fiji its signature smooth taste." Well, okay, but anybody in Colorado who finds Fiji's taste compelling should consider that this water is drawn from an aquifer 6,500 miles away, bottled in polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic bottles (whose petroleum-intensive production can best be envisioned by imagining each 12-oz. bottle ¼-filled with oil), then loaded onto one of the many giant container ships that crisscross the Pacific until it reaches a western U.S. port where it is then loaded onto a succession of 18-wheelers (who use 50 million barrels of oil each year in the U.S. to move just bottled water) before it

is at last delivered to the local King Soopers to slake your thirst. If you're conscientious, you'll recycle the bottle but it will be among the only 20 percent of water bottles recycled in the U.S.; the rest with any luck go to landfills but some of the unrecycled 24 billion bottles end up on roadsides or in waterways where they gradually break into microscopic particles that contaminate water and soil and find their way into your food.

Wouldn't it have been just as easy to turn on your faucet?

Sure, Fiji water is an extreme case but even locally bottled water carries some of the same environmental price tags, like extraction, shipping and plastic bottles. And while I suspect green Colorado's recycling rates might be higher than 20 percent that still leaves a lot of plastic unrecycled.

Safer? Better?

There's been some horror stories about public tap water, but consider this: municipal tap water is carefully processed and screened for pollutants. There are rigid protocols in place to ensure the safety of what's delivered to our homes. While tap water purity varies according to region, the same can also be said for bottled water. The National Resources Defense Council conducted an intensive study of bottled water and found that 22 percent of the water tested contained contaminant levels that exceeded the state health limits. Moreover, in documented taste tests most people could not tell the difference between commercial bottled water and tap water.

Further muddying the issue are studies that show some of the bottled water being sold is actually municipal tap water. In theory, you could be buying the very tap water that comes into your home for 300 times the cost.

If you're concerned about your local water, a better alternative to buying bottled water is to run it through a filter on your faucet or water container.

Big PETs become little PETs

The PETs that comprise most water bottles have the disturbing habit of photodegrading in the presence of light and oxygen. The bottles break down into smaller and smaller – nearly microscopic – fragments that over time enter streams, rivers and oceans and insinuate themselves in the food chain. PETs can also leach into the water in the bottle after as little as 10 weeks of storage and much faster if the bottles are left in the sun, like in a car.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration and others have found that PETs are okay to use, but The American Chemistry Council cautions that products made with PET should be used only as indicated by the manufacturer; never reuse anything made with PET. Dispose of it once it's been used. (So much for repurposing water bottles.)

Bottled water does have its place. What would we in Lyons have done after the 2013 flood without the pallets of bottled water that were trucked in? And sometimes the relative safety of a trusted brand of bottled water during travel is necessary.

But remember to recycle, don't use the bottle again and make sure you're getting more than resold tap water in the bottle.

And if you really must have pumice-infused water from thousands of miles away, it's your call. Me, I'll be drinking out of the garden hose.

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