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Thirst for bottled water unleashes flood of environmental concerns

By Krisy Gashler, The Ithaca (N.Y.) Journal

Once reserved for Perrier-sipping elitists, bottled water has become a drink of the masses.

Sales have quadrupled in the last 20 years, and rose almost 8% last year alone.

Marian Brown, an assistant to the provost at Ithaca College who works on sustainability initiatives, has watched this growth with dismay.

"More and more people, more and more entities on campus, even for special events, were starting to think, 'Gosh, let's do bottled water,' instead of putting out (pitchers) of water," Brown said. "It's like, 'God no, they're making it worse!'"

The problem isn't the water — it's the use of resources. It takes a lot of oil to make all those little bottles and ship them, sometimes halfway around the world. But Tom Lauria, vice president of communications for the International Bottled Water Association, said bottled water isn't the environmental bad guy.

Sales on the rise

There's no question that sales of bottled water are increasing.

According to Lauria's bottled water association, in 1990, 2.2 billion total gallons of bottled water were sold worldwide. In 2007, it was 8.8 billion.

In just the last year, wholesale dollar sales for bottled water grew 7.8%, to \$11.7 billion in 2007, according to the bottled water trade group.

Increased purchasing of bottled water is good news, Lauria said, because much of the sales growth is coming from people making a health-conscious decision not to buy soda and sugary juices.

"We're finding that most of that growth is in category switching," Lauria said, citing consumer research. "People are making a decision at lunch to buy bottled water as opposed to something else. Some people want to reduce caffeine, sugar, many reasons."

The Container Recycling Institute found that between 1997 and 2005, sales of carbonated drinks remained relatively flat while sales of noncarbonated drinks, including bottled water, almost tripled.

Plastic water bottles produced for U.S. consumption take 1.5 million barrels of oil per year, according to a 2007 resolution passed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors. That much energy could

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power 250,000 homes or fuel 100,000 cars for a year, according to the resolution.

Cornell University professor and environmentalist Doug James said the irony of bottled water is that it's marketed as clean and healthy when its production contributes to unnecessary environmental degradation.

"Fiji water, for example," he said. "A one-liter bottle is taken out of the aquifer of this little island, and shipped all the way across the world, producing like half a pound of greenhouse gases so you can have this one-liter bottle of water."

The taste question

Another obvious issue in the consumption of bottled water is taste.

In some areas, tap water simply isn't drinkable, Brown said, and in those situations, bottled water is a useful resource.

Other consumers simply prefer the taste of bottled water, Lauria said.

"Consumers have lots of preferences and some people want mineral water for taste," he said. "Everyone has their own reasons for buying products. And some people have a preference for bottled water."

But, Brown argues, perceptions about the taste of tap water and realities about the taste of tap water can be very different things.

To test her hypothesis that tap water tastes as least as good as bottled water, Brown has been conducting a series of taste tests at Ithaca College in the past year.

In five blind taste tests over the last year, the tap water has won four times, she said.

The growth in advertising and consumption of bottled water has occurred "frankly, since the big soda companies bought up water," she said. "They would buy up the Dasanis, and they would buy up the Poland Springs, and you get into the huge marketing machines of the major soda industries, Coke and Pepsi, notably, and they take it to a whole different field."

Water and waste

Then there's the waste stream.

In roughly the last 10 years, the amount of polyethylene terephthalate plastic bottles being recycled increased from about 775 million pounds in 1995 to about 1,170 million in 2005, according to the Container Recycling Institute.

But during the same time period, the amount of PET bottles going into landfills skyrocketed from 1,175 million to 3,900 million pounds.

Water bottles are a big part of that problem, Brown says, because there are so many more of them, and because in many states, water bottles don't have a redemption value like soda and beer bottles do.

Lauria said the focus on water bottles is unfair because they make up "less than one-third of one percent" of the entire U.S. waste stream.

"There are many other plastic objects that are in our lives that no one seems to be concerned about and yet it all needs to be recycled," he said. "As you recycle bottled water you should also recycle many other products that are in your refrigerator when you're done with them."

Brown said that better recycling rates of water bottles would certainly help, but even better would be for people to stop using bottled water when tap water will do just fine.

"Even if we can do a good job of separating and recycling water bottles, it still comes down to the fact that it's completely unnecessary," she said. "From a cost standpoint alone, people should be starting to think about, 'I'm paying \$1.19 or whatever it is for a bottle of water that I could get free out of my drinking water tap?'"

Hidden costs of water

Strictly speaking, tap water isn't free — it costs about \$0.00002 per ounce.

But single-serve bottled water costs between 1,000 and 4,000 times more, according to the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

Some cities, including San Francisco, Albuquerque, Minneapolis, and Seattle, have banned city purchase of single-serve bottled water because of waste impact from the bottles and because it's viewed as an unnecessary cost to taxpayers.

On the waste reduction hierarchy, reduce and reuse should be above recycle, said Tompkins County Solid Waste manager Barb Eckstrom.

Even so, bottled water can provide a healthier choice in situations, like sports events, where people are going to buy drinks anyway, she said.

Brown reiterated that clearly "there is a place for bottled water."

"But for so many of us here in the Finger Lakes we're so blessed with excellent water systems, we need to at all costs preserve and maintain (them)," she said.

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