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Think Outside the Bottle

At most meetings I have been at lately someone has offered me a bottle of water. I think we can all agree that the bottled water trend has become pervasive in our society. Yet countless articles and studies suggest there is no proof that bottled water is healthier or safer than tap water. And the negative issues surrounding bottled water extend far beyond that. Not only have the marketing claims been called into question, but vast environmental and ethical concerns have also been researched extensively.

Before the water is ever put into the bottles, the bottles have to be manufactured, which expends an enormous amount of energy, and consumes vast amounts of water. In fact, the amount of water required to make one bottle of water is significantly more than what the bottle will contain when filled.

Next is shipping. Many brands of bottled water tout their original destination or water source – and though Fiji may sound exotic, it is thousands of kilometres away from Canada. Bottled water is a fast growing industry that sees hundreds of billions of litres of bottled water shipped around the world every year, adding to global carbon emissions and climate change.

As if that isn't enough to contemplate, research estimates that 80 percent of water bottles are still being deposited in landfills and even incinerated, both in our own country and abroad. And this 80 percent landfill waste occurs despite the fact that most municipalities across North America have made recycling fairly accessible.

The bottle water industry has exploded over the past decade, with sales increasing by 10 to 20 percent each year. In fact, bottled water is winning against most beverages as the 'drink of choice' among North Americans. More bottles add up to more waste, and more new bottles to manufacture. Then again, even if all the bottles did make their way into blue bins, recycling is not the best solution to the problem, as a lot of energy and transportation is consumed in the recycling process as well.

There are a host of environmental impacts including damage to wildlife and marine life, and air and water pollution associated with raw materials extraction, processing, and industrial container production; as well as landfill and incineration hazards.

So what is it exactly that we are paying for? The statistics show that 40 percent of bottled water is simply filtered tap water – that's right – the same liquid that costs you next to nothing out of the kitchen tap, is costing you \$1 (or more) per 355ml bottle. In fact, both major bottling companies in Canada use municipal tap water in their principal labelled bottled waters. Now that's what I call 'mark-up'! In fact, the retail cost of bottled water is primarily related to packaging and promotion, than to the cost of water itself.

In the growing body of research around this industry, I have found no evidence that proves many of the claims some of these products make – healthier, safer, more energizing, etc. In fact, municipal tap water is much more highly regulated throughout North America, including in our own city, than the bottled water industry.

The good news is that many individuals and businesses are ‘getting off the bottle’, and have stopped buying, consuming and selling bottled water. And some large organizations have even called for large-scale boycotts of the product, not only for environmental reasons but also because they believe that water is a basic human right and not a (for-profit) commodity.

Here is a question to ponder: “If we are upset with the price of a litre of gasoline at \$1.38, why don’t we blink an eye at paying the same price for a 355ml bottle of water, something that is highly accessible to us from our tap everyday and is virtually free?”

Valerie Hillier is a Frederictonian who believes in taking action on environmental concerns. Her most recent water bill charged 57 cents per kilolitre of water used! Turn on the tap, get off the bottle. For more information on this topic check out www.thinkoutsidethebottle.org