

Has the bloom come off the rose of bottled water?

Twenty-five years ago it would have been unthinkable that bottled water would become so popular in North America. Sure if you go to Europe, practically every town has its own bottled water available in “still” or “with gas” and amazingly often even fairly average European restaurants offer as many different types of bottled water as wine on the menu. Yet, in North America first it was Perrier, the French company that made drinking bottled water chic. Since then a cavalcade of different types of bottled water has entered the water market and, of course, it has prompted some of the largest food and beverage manufacturers in the world to get into the bottled water business, including: Coca-cola (Dasani), Pepsi (Aquafina), Nestle and others.

In an increasingly environmentally and health-conscious world, the pervasiveness of bottled water in society has raised a number of questions and concerns. Is bottled water actually better than tap water? Does it have attributes, such as improved taste (or other characteristics) that make it better than tap water? How safe is the actual plastic that is used for bottled water? What about the water itself? And then there is the environmental concern over the mounting tons of garbage that are created by the disposal of one-time use plastic water bottles – the cost of which usually ends up being borne by local government (e.g. city, county or regional government) through their responsibility for garbage disposal. Statistics Canada says nearly one-third of all Canadian households are choosing bottled water over tap water, and the data indicate those numbers are still on the rise; plus 40% to 80% of empty bottles end up as solid waste.

Action by Local Governments

In April, 2009, the City of Vancouver became the latest Canadian city to pass a resolution banning the sale and use of bottled water on city-owned property. Other cities, such as Toronto and London, Ontario, have already passed similar bans and earlier this year the two of them co-sponsored a resolution calling on Canadian municipalities to follow suit. It also says tap water in Canada is safe, healthy and highly regulated. The often stated principal justification for a ban is a reduction in solid waste and the fact that municipal water supplies are safe, of high quality and less expensive than bottled water. Plus, in an era where there is a desire for increased government (and business) accountability, it seems kind of silly for a municipal council (such as Vancouver, which through the Greater Vancouver Regional District is in the domestic water distribution business) to be supporting the consumption of bottled water at its council meetings or at City Hall. For more information on the City of Vancouver’s ban on bottled water and actions by other municipalities go to:

<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2009/04/23/bc-vancouver-bottled-water.html>;

and

<http://www.vancouver.sun.com/news/Canadian+municipalities+vote+phase+using+bottled+water/1365834/story.html>

In the greater scheme of things action such as this by the City of Vancouver will do little to affect the overall volume of plastic water bottles that become part of the municipal waste stream, yet they do send a message to the broader society and foreshadow an emerging trend that other municipalities are embracing. At the same time, much like the incremental increase in regulations respecting cigarette smoking in public places, these things have a way of building a momentum of their own over time.

What about water quality?

Some people complain they do not like the taste of tap water and others express concern over its health quality. There have been plenty of blind taste tests done comparing different types of bottled water to tap water. For instance, the ABC television program "20/20" took five bottles of national brands of bottled water and a sample of tap water from a drinking fountain in the middle of New York City and sent them to microbiologist Aaron Margolin of the University of New Hampshire to test for bacteria that can make you sick, like *e. coli*. The report came back that there was actually no difference between the New York City tap water and the bottled waters evaluated". Other scientists have run similar tests and have consistently found that tap water is as good for you as bottled waters that cost 500 times more.

The same program conducted a taste test, offering people New York City tap water and five other bottled waters, including Evian (the top-selling bottled water), Aquafina, Poland Spring, Iceland Spring (which comes all the way from Iceland), and American Fare, a discount brand from Kmart, which sells for less than half the price of Evian. Many who participated in the taste test were bottled water drinkers and indicated they do so because tap water doesn't taste as good. Yet, in the taste test, Kmart bottles water came out on top, Aquafina was second. Iceland Spring and tap water were tied for third, Poland Spring was fourth and last was Evian.

While, this test should not be looked upon as being scientific, other tests have shown that people actually often prefer tap water. The "20-20" program concluded that "if you buy bottled water because you think it's healthier than tap water, test after test shows no evidence of that. And if you buy fancy brands because you think they taste better, you're probably just buying the hype." To read more go to: <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/Health/Story?id=728070&page=3>

Other studies show that while municipal water supplies are typically highly regulated as to quality, bottled waters can sometimes contain higher levels of contaminants or chlorine than prevailing health standards permit. Ironically, American Fare bottled water from Kmart (which rated highest in the taste test referenced above), in other tests was shown to have levels of chlorine several times in excess of accepted drinking water standards. At the same time, some bottled water including brands distributed by leading manufacturers is often little more than municipal water that has been filtered. To read more go to: <http://www.cbc.ca/consumer/story/2008/10/14/bottled-water-contamination.html>

Some forms of filtration and reverse osmosis systems can be problematic as well in that they strip water of minerals, essentially creating distilled (or dead) water, which can over periods of prolonged use have the effect of actually removing essential minerals from the body.

Water is the most essential nutrient – humans, animals and plants can not live without it. Therefore, it is important to ensure the water you consume and use has a high level of vitality.

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