

Opinion: Turn on the taps! Bottled water industry is bad for the Earth

By Project Syndicate, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.06.15

Word Count **745**



John Hawk, 77, fills a jug with drinking water during his weekly visit to Big Springs at Mount Shasta, California, April 16, 2015. Photo: Don Bartletti/Los Angeles Time

BERLIN, Germany – Over the last 15 years, the bottled-water industry has exploded in size and shows no sign of slowing down.

In fact, sales of bottled water are growing faster than any other kind of drink, even in cities where water from the faucet is safe. This has been a disaster for the environment and the world's poor.

Damaging The Wetlands

The environmental problems begin early on, because of where the water comes from. Bottled water can include everything from “purified spring water” to flavored water and water enriched with vitamins and minerals. Most of the bottled water sold worldwide is drawn from underground water reserves, many of which feed rivers and lakes. Using water from these sources can make droughts worse.

But bottling melted water from mountain glaciers in the Alps, the Andes, the Arctic, Patagonia, the Cascades, the Himalayas and the Rockies is not much better. It diverts water from areas that need it like wetlands, which help to sustain a variety of plants, animals and microorganisms. This has not stopped big companies that bottle water from aggressively seeking to buy water from glaciers. China's booming mineral-water industry, for example, taps into Himalayan glaciers, which damages neighboring Tibet's environment.

California Protests

Most of today's bottled water, however, is not glacier or natural spring water. Instead, it is municipal water or, more often, groundwater that has been cleaned and purified. Not surprisingly, some local authorities and citizens groups have argued that bottled-water companies use too much water, and even cause pollution. In California, which has experienced a drought for three years, some bottlers have faced protests and investigations. One company was even banned from using spring water.

Even worse, processing, bottling and shipping the water uses up natural resources. It takes 1.6 liters of water, on average, to end up with one liter of bottled water. This wastes a lot of water. Processing and transporting the bottled water burns fuel, which leads to climate change.

The problems do not stop when the water reaches the consumer. The industry mainly uses bottles made from a plastic called polyethylene terephthalate (PET). It is made with oil and natural gas. In the 1990s, the use of PET made bottled water cheap and popular.

Too Much Garbage

But PET does not break down and decompose, and, while it can be recycled, it usually is not. As a result, bottled water is now the single biggest source of garbage from plastic. Tens of billions of bottles end up in the trash every year. In the United States, sales of bottled water last year increased 7 percent from 2013. Some 80 percent of all plastic water bottles become litter, stuffing landfills.

Some might argue that the safety and health benefits of bottled water are more important than these environmental concerns. But that claim isn't true either. Although tap water in Western countries is not always of the highest quality, neither is bottled water. Sometimes chemicals or bacteria get into the water, and companies have to recall the bottles and have them destroyed.

Indeed, tap water is often healthier than bottled water. Bottled water may lack fluoride, a mineral that helps prevent tooth decay. Fluoride is naturally found in most groundwater and can be added in tiny amounts to drinking water.

Tap Water Is Cheaper And Better

To be sure, people are paying attention to these problems. In the United States, some universities and at least 18 national parks ban the sale of bottled water on their land because of their effect on the environment.

The bottled-water industry sees the danger as well, and is doing everything possible to keep public opinion on its side.

But make no mistake: Bottled water is adding to the world's resource and environmental problems. It is making it harder to deliver drinkable water to the world's poor. It delivers no health benefits over clean tap water, and it does not even taste better. Indeed, taste tests reveal that people cannot tell the difference between bottled and tap water.

Obviously, tap water needs to change its image. Unfortunately, tap water cannot easily advertise itself. When a product that is cheaper and better does not win, that is bad news for consumers. When the product is water, we all lose.

Evidence-based discussion prompt:

What would the author of the article above think about the recycled sewer water project in [this \(https://newsela.com/articles/water-recycle/id/8889/\)](https://newsela.com/articles/water-recycle/id/8889/) article? Why would the author have this opinion? Use evidence from both articles to support your answer.

Quiz

- 1 In which of the following sentences does the author acknowledge a differing point of view?
- (A) Some 80 percent of all plastic water bottles become litter, stuffing landfills.
 - (B) Some might argue that the safety and health benefits of bottled water are more important than these environmental concerns.
 - (C) Sometimes chemicals or bacteria get into the water, and companies have to recall the bottles and have them destroyed.
 - (D) Bottled water may lack fluoride, a mineral that helps prevent tooth decay.
- 2 Which sentence suggests that many organizations agree with the author's point of view?
- (A) Not surprisingly, some local authorities and citizens groups have argued that bottled-water companies use too much water, and even cause pollution.
 - (B) In California, which has experienced a drought for three years, some bottlers have faced protests and investigations.
 - (C) In the United States, some universities and at least 18 national parks ban the sale of bottled water on their land because of their effect on the environment.
 - (D) The bottled-water industry sees the danger as well, and is doing everything possible to keep public opinion on its side.
- 3 Based on the author's claims about bottled water companies, which sentences help to explain why bottled water is popular despite the benefits of tap water?
- (A) Although tap water in Western countries is not always of the highest quality, neither is bottled water.
 - (B) Sometimes chemicals or bacteria get into the water, and companies have to recall the bottles and have them destroyed.
 - (C) Unfortunately, tap water cannot easily advertise itself.
 - (D) When a product that is cheaper and better does not win, that is bad news for consumers.

- 4 Which sentence supports the author's claim that bottled water is bad for the environment?
- (A) The environmental problems begin early on, because of where the water comes from.
 - (B) Bottled water can include everything from "purified spring water" to flavored water and water enriched with vitamins and minerals.
 - (C) But PET does not break down and decompose, and, while it can be recycled, it usually is not.
 - (D) Fluoride is naturally found in most groundwater and can be added in tiny amounts to drinking water.