

Opinion: Tap water is better than bottled water for people and the Earth

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

BERLIN, Germany – Over the last 15 years, more and more people have been drinking bottled water. This move away from drinking tap water shows no sign of slowing down.

In fact, sales of bottled water are going up faster than any other kind of drink. It is true even in cities where it is safe to drink water from the faucet. This has been a disaster for the environment and for poor people.

Making Droughts Worse

The environmental problems start early. Most bottled water comes from underground water. Much of this underground water could have flowed into rivers and lakes. Using this water can make droughts worse.

Many companies use water from mountain glaciers, but this is not much better. When the water melts it usually flows to areas like rivers or wetlands. When companies take glacier water, they take it from areas that need it. This has not stopped big companies that bottle

water from using water from glaciers. China's bottled-water companies, for example, take water from glaciers in the Himalayan mountains. What they do damages neighboring Tibet's environment.

Most of today's bottled water does not come from glaciers or natural spring water. Instead, it is water that has been treated to be safe to drink. Sometimes it is town or city water. More often, it is groundwater that has been cleaned and purified. Not surprisingly, bottled-water companies have been accused of using too much water. In California, which is in the middle of its worst drought ever, people are protesting against some bottled water companies. One company was even stopped from using spring water.

Waste And Pollution

Another problem is that it takes about 1.6 liters of water to end up with one liter of bottled water. This wastes a lot of water. Also transporting the bottled water to stores burns fuel and creates pollution. It adds to the problem of climate change, which involves heating up the Earth.

The problems do not stop when the water reaches people who buy it. Water bottles are made from a plastic called polyethylene terephthalate (PET).

PET does not break down and decompose in garbage dumps. Although it can be recycled, people usually do not put it in the recycle bin. 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, 8 out of every 10 plastic water bottles are just thrown out. That equals 80 percent of all water bottles.

Tap Water Often Healthier

Some may say that bottled water is safer and more healthy than tap water. They may also say water safety is more important than the harmful effect on the environment. That claim is not true either. Tap water in America is not always high quality. Yet, neither is bottled water. Sometimes chemicals or bacteria get into bottled water, and companies have to destroy it.

Actually, tap water is often healthier than bottled water. Bottled water may lack fluoride. The mineral helps prevent tooth cavities. Fluoride is found in most groundwater and can be added in tiny amounts to tap water.

To be sure, people are paying attention to these problems. In the United States, some universities and national parks will not sell bottled water. They are concerned that bottled water harms the environment.

Tap Water Needs A Better Image

Bottled-water companies are doing everything they can to convince people that bottled water is healthy.

Make no mistake, though. Bottled water adds to the world's environmental problems. It makes it harder to deliver drinkable water to poor people. It is not any healthier than clean tap water. It does not even taste better. Indeed, people cannot tell the difference between bottled and tap water.

Obviously, tap water needs to change how people think about it. More people need to know that tap water is safer and healthier. Unfortunately, tap water cannot advertise itself. When a product that is cheaper and better does not win, that is bad news. When the product is water, we all lose.