

The Emperor's New Water

A Modern Story of Deceit, Inanity, and Bottles

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"It struck me...that all you had to do is take the water out of the ground and then sell it for more than the price of wine, milk, or for that matter, oil"

Gustava Leven, past chairman of Perrier

What if I were to stand on this stage and offer you a sandwich, much like any you could find in your home, save that its ingredients and packaging were likely far more dangerous to your health? What if I told you it was actually safer than the one you had at home, even if countless others had proven the opposite? What if, on top of all that, I were to charge you 10,000 dollars for this sandwich? You'd probably laugh me off the stage, but in reality, if we're to believe this analogy crafted by sustainability activist Annie Leonard, you'd probably take me up on my offer—enough to make it into a 100 billion dollar international industry, as found in the Pacific Institute's biennial report on freshwater resources. Just make a few substitutions—swap the sandwich for water and myself for beverage conglomerates such as Pepsi, Coca-Cola, and Nestle—and you'll have what Salt Lake City's mayor, Rocky Anderson, dubs the "greatest marketing scam of all time:" the bottled water industry. Though these companies may claim to legitimately and safely address a common human need, the American public needs to discontinue its costly, unhealthy, and destructive addiction to the bottle and return to the tap.

In the last four years alone, the bottled water industry has grown by a factor of six, despite that bottled water, by volume, costs even more than gasoline. How can these companies succeed so well at selling a product already available and near-free to boot? By manufacturing demand. As Jeff Caso, former senior vice president with Nestle himself admits, "We sell water...so we have to be clever," which they certainly have been. Since the late 1980s, bottled water companies like Nestle have waged one of the most aggressive advertising campaigns in history against tapped water, alternatively scaring consumers away from the tap—notably with advertisements featuring glasses draining and refilling to the flush of a toilet—and luring them to the bottle—with advertisements featuring young celebrities and bountiful landscapes. As MacArthur Fellow and president of the Pacific Institute Peter Gleik notes, "they don't try to sell water: they sell youth, health, beauty, romance, status image, sex, and fear" with slogans like Evian's "your natural source of youth," Dasani's "can't live without it," and starkly Agua Castello's, "pleasure within you." Never mind that these intentional manipulations of the public work, and that they

successfully sell water in bottles at 1900 times the cost of that from faucets; never mind that, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, 3 out of 4 people now drink bottled water and 1 out of 5 drink bottled water only; our free market might have even granted them the right to do so, if only their purported healthful product wasn't actually the opposite—harmful.

Bottled water companies like to tout that their products are "pure," "safe," and "healthy," but in reality both the bottle and the water itself come with a myriad of dangers. The plastic used in the packaging commonly contains one of two potent petrochemicals, either polyethylene terephthalate—PTA for short—or bisphenol-A—commonly known as BPA. PTA is derived from refining crude oil; its primary ingredient, the known carcinogen peroxyethylene, can at any stage in its production leach into its intended contents. As for BPA, Dr. Vom Saal of the University of Missouri notes, "there is virtually no major human health trend over the past 30 years that hasn't increased... related to the exposure to this [compound]: obesity, breast cancer, prostate cancer, liver disease, ovarian disease, disease of the uterus, low sperm count, and even brain disorder." These, however, are only the immediate findings associated with the chemicals in the packaging; nobody has yet to study the true long-term effects of exposure to this plastic.

The Food and Drug Administration, meanwhile, the agency responsible for the oversight of the industry, turns a blind eye. Under FDA regulation, companies need only submit a quality report on water they sell across state lines, accounting only for one-third of all bottled water sales. Even then the companies need only submit one report at their discretion, meaning that they may run as many tests as they like that produce unfavorable reports until they find just one that's suitable. The others never leave company records. The reports that do wind up in the FDA come only to the desk of review chemist Lauren Robin, who herself admits that, "I do spend some of my time on bottled water but I have other responsibilities as well." Tap water, on the other hand, is subject to the Environmental Protection Agency's regulation, and thereby must be tested many times a day, usually for a total of 300 to 400 times a month, with full report disclosure. No surprise, then, that bottled water tests significantly higher than tapped for contaminants like sodium hydroxide, kerosene, styrene, mold, fecal coliforms, and others; effectively, half of one person in the FDA checks the production of all bottled water, while thousands of individual municipalities vigorously test their own tapped water.

Nevertheless, Americans continue to consume about eighty million bottles of this water each day, amounting to about thirty billion bottles each year. Placed end to end, Leonard found, "this bottle waste could circle the earth more than 265 times." Not taking into account the energy necessary for their costly shipment, Gleik finds in his book *Bottled*

and Sold that the energy spent on their production alone could power one million cars for an entire year. The pollution does not end there, however. Since only twenty percent of water bottles end up recycled in the States after consumption, the remaining eighty percent finds its way either into landfills—to be burned and released as toxic gases into our atmosphere—or into the water runoff. There, they continually break apart into smaller and smaller pieces until eventually winding up trapped in giant ocean current patterns called gyres.

In 1999, marine researcher Captain Charles Moore analyzed the water content of the largest of these—the North Pacific Subtropic gyre—and found six times more pieces of plastic than plankton—the staple food source of marine life. In conducting the same survey in 2008, Captain Moore then found plastic to outnumber plankton forty-six-to-one, prompting him to author a book on his discoveries entitled *Plastic Ocean*. Within, he warns us of the dangers that might ensue when first fish and other wildlife, either directly or indirectly, regularly consume these poisonous petrochemicals, and then we them.

Why, then, should we continue to hurt our wallets, health, and world by using bottled water? We shouldn't; at a minimum, the FDA must tighten its regulation on the industry and ensure our safety. Better yet, to preserve the environment, states should implement "Bottle Bill" legislature to drastically increase recycling rates by adding a small tax on each purchase of bottled water and refunding it upon the return of the bottle. Best of all, we as the consumers should stop buying bottled water and instead fill reusable metal bottles from the tap. Since making the switch in my ninth grade year, I've saved about 10,000 dollars and 9,000 bottles—an amount which, to help you visualize, if stacked in cases of Deer Park would stretch ten feet across, five feet high, and five feet deep (motion on the stage). Should all the people in this room do the same and drink their recommended eight glasses of water a day from the tap and not from bottles for a year, we could together save almost a million dollars and 850,000 bottles—an amount would fill the stage with cases of Deer Park. Rarely in our modern world can we make so great a difference with so little effort. I ask, then, that you join me: let's quit the bottle, and take back the tap.