

## Bottled Water Ethical Dilemma

The following article deals with the environmental and social ethics of choosing to drink bottled water over tap water. The people, places, and facts are all real, but the article presents just one side of the issue. Some opposing viewpoints are represented in the questions at the end. Read the article and think about the questions. Be prepared to discuss both.

### Blame the Bottle: The Emerging Case Against Bottled Water

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“...Some churches are urging their congregations to boycott bottled water for ethical and theological reasons. Bottled water, they argue, is morally tainted and should be avoided.”

—Martin Mittelstaedt, *Globe and Mail*

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#### Toronto—August 2006

The United Church of Canada (UCC) issued a social policy position claiming that the commercialization of water resources threatens the environment and the health of the world’s poor, many of whom lack access to clean drinking water.

Writing in the UCC report *Water: Life Before Profit*, the 39<sup>th</sup> General Council affirmed the belief that “water is a sacred gift that connects all life. ...Privatization turns a common good into a commodity, depriving those who cannot pay and further threatening local ecosystems.”

The Council called upon the Canadian federal government to declare water a human right and encouraged UCC members to avoid purchasing bottled water on the grounds that bottling and selling water is contrary to the church’s view of water as a shared public good.

“Water is seen increasingly as a saleable commodity, used to make a profit,” said David Hallman, a UCC official, “as opposed to our perspective of it being an element of life and good for all creation.”

Most Americans know people who consider the drinking habits of others sinful, but when the beverage in question is bottled water, the notion may seem puzzling. After all, what could be more healthy and natural than drinking water?

Chez Panisse is a trendy restaurant in Berkley, California, that specializes in locally grown French *cuisine du marché*. Two years ago the restaurant stopped offering its customers Santa Lucia® or San Pellegrino® sparkling bottled water, replacing these imported brands with filtered municipal water, freshly carbonated on site. The *San Francisco Chronicle* picked up on the trend in 2007, reporting that many upscale Bay Area restaurants, such as Incanto, Poggio, and Nopa, were chucking the Evian® and Perrier® for spiffed up *eau ordinaire*—city tap water.

“Our whole goal of sustainability means using as little energy as we have to,” said Mike Kossa-Rienzi, general manager of Chez Panisse. “It just doesn’t make sense to use all the energy and resources to ship bottled water from Italy, truck it to our restaurant and then after that deal with the recycling of it.”

The backlash against bottled water appears to be growing nationwide, spurred by concerns of the energy needed to transport the 1 billion bottles of water shipped weekly in the U.S. alone and the need to dispose of the containers in an environmentally sound way.

According to the Earth Policy Institute, a Washington, DC, environmental think tank, the plastic water bottles Americans use require 1.5 million barrels of oil a year just to make, and that’s not even considering the countless barrels needed to transport and refrigerate them.

Last year, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley endorsed a measure to add a 10-cent tax to each bottle of bottled water to offset declining revenues from the city water system, reduce litter, and decrease the amount of oil used to produce and transport bottled water.

Other cities have followed the trend. The mayors of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Salt Lake City have recently banned city spending on bottled water or asked city employees not to drink it on the job. Salt Lake City Mayor “Rocky” Anderson was brazen enough at a local press conference to declare that the consumption of bottled water “very

clearly reflects the wasteful and reckless consumerism in this country. ...You really have to wonder at the utter stupidity and the irresponsibility sometimes of American consumers.”

Stupid or not, Americans sure seem thirsty. In 2006, we spent about \$12 billion on bottled water, each person drinking on average 28 gallons of the stuff annually, making bottled water as popular as milk. According to author Charles Fishman, Americans spent more money on bottled water in 2007 than on iPods or movie tickets.

The American bottled water craze began in the late 1970s, partly as a way for people to present a healthful image that ran counter to the three-martini business lunch, which was increasingly seen as a serious social problem. In the 1980s, bottled water’s marketing centered on images of fit young people sweating at the gym. Madonna popularized Evian by drinking it onstage at her concerts. “It was a status symbol,” says Ed Slade, who became Evian’s vice president of marketing in 1990. “If you were cool, you were drinking bottled water.”

A sense of social justice is another factor that inspires many who want to see the bottled water fad become passé. The act of spending top dollar for a product you can get almost free, while 1 billion people in the world have no dependable source of safe drinking water, seems to many the height of arrogant, conspicuous consumption.

The island of Fiji makes a good case in point. Fiji has a modern bottling plant that produces over 1 million bottles a day of Fiji® artesian water, one of the hottest brands of bottled water on the U.S. market today. Yet, more than half the people in Fiji don’t have clean reliable drinking water. Charles Fishman writes that “it is easier for the typical American in Beverly Hills or Baltimore to get a drink of safe, pure, refreshing Fiji water than it is for most people in Fiji.”

Fishman goes further writing, “The global economy has contrived to deny the most fundamental element of life to 1 billion people, while delivering to us an array of water ‘varieties’ from around the globe, not one of which we actually need.”

According to author Tom Standage, writing in a 2005 op-ed for *The New York Times*, “The logical response, for those of us in the developed world, is to stop spending money on bottled water and to give the money to water charities.”

It may be too early to tell whether the fickle god of fashion has struck a deathblow to bottled water, but word of the product’s new “uncoolness” is rapidly spreading, at least among elite consumers. In August 2007, *The New York Times* ran an editorial called “In Praise of Tap Water,” which argued against bottled water on the grounds that the U.S. has the best public water supplies in the world. According to Alex Williams, writing in the same newspaper two weeks later, the editorial “was high on the list of the most e-mailed articles for several days.”

### Questions to Consider

- 1) The policy position of the United Church of Canada is that safe drinking water is a human right. Do you agree? Why or why not?
  - a) What is a human right? For example, what did Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence mean by *inalienable rights*?
- 2) Charles Fishman writes that, “The global economy has contrived to deny the most fundamental element of life to 1 billion people, while delivering to us an array of water ‘varieties’ from around the globe, not one of which we actually need.”
  - a) The author seems to blame the global economy for “denying” 1 billion people safe, dependable drinking water? Do you agree? If so, what solutions do you propose?

- i) Give some reasons why you think 1 billion people might not have enough safe water to drink. Are the reasons all economic in nature?
  - ii) Is the job of ensuring that people have clean drinking water mainly one for governments or for private businesses?
  - iii) Is clean, safe drinking water free? If not, who pays? What if a country or a people are too poor to pay?
- b) Fishman rightly states that we don't really *need* the variety of bottled water available from around the globe. What other things do we routinely buy that we don't actually need? List them. Should you still buy them? Explain. Some points to consider:
- i) Is buying something the same thing as denying it to someone else? Why or why not?
  - ii) What if someone argued the following: "I don't like the way my city's water tastes. If I couldn't buy bottled water, I'd probably drink soda, which is bad for me. Soda is also bad for the environment since bottles still have to be made, and the product still trucked to stores. So if I stop drinking bottled water, no one is helped and I am harmed. Therefore, I will continue drinking bottled water." What do you think about this argument?
  - iii) If the objections to bottled water are that it's environmentally expensive to ship from source to store and no one really needs it, couldn't the same objections be raised against wine, which typically comes in much heavier glass bottles? In fact, since wine can also cause health problems, couldn't we argue that the anti-water protests are misplaced?
  - iv) Who, beside yourself or parents, should tell you what you should or shouldn't legally buy? Explain.
- 3) What do you think about the mayor of Salt Lake City calling American consumers stupid? Is this the kind of thing an elected representative of the people should say? Why or why not? Suppose the mayor needed to say something outlandish to get his point in the news. Would that make it (more) morally acceptable to criticize the entire population?
- 4) The Earth Policy Institute claims that it takes 1.5 million barrels of oil each year to make the plastic for bottled water. The United States currently consumes 20 million barrels of oil *per day*. What percentage of this use goes for water bottles? (Hint: it's minuscule.) Does this knowledge change your perception of the Earth Policy Institute's statistic? Why or why not?
- 5) Do you think it's the right ethical choice to give the money you'd normally spend on bottled water to charities that help poor people get clean water? What other purchased items would you be willing to forego to help others get similar items? What things would you not forego? Why?
- 6) Would the lives of people in Fiji be improved if the Fiji Water bottling plant was not there? Discuss why or why not.
- 7) Do you think that the rise in popularity of bottled water in the 1980s may have been partly due to "snob appeal"? Why or why not? If so, describe how.
- 8) Read the following passage by Daniel Gross from *Slate* magazine, who summarizes his view of why bottled water is becoming a no-no in certain circles:

"Bottled water's swift transformation from glass-encased luxury good to déclassé, plastic-wrapped menace was entirely predictable. Over the past century, we've seen numerous examples of products that, so long as they were available only to a select few, were viewed by those elites as brilliant, life-improving developments: the automobile, coal-generated electricity,

air conditioning. But once companies figured out how to make them available to the masses, the elites suddenly condemned them as dangerous and socially destructive.

So long as only a few people were drinking Evian, Perrier, and San Pellegrino, bottled water wasn't perceived as a societal ill. Now that everybody is toting bottles of Poland Spring, Aquafina, and Dasani, it's a big problem."

Gross thinks that the opposition to bottled water now is based on a type of "reverse snob appeal." Do you agree? Why or why not?

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