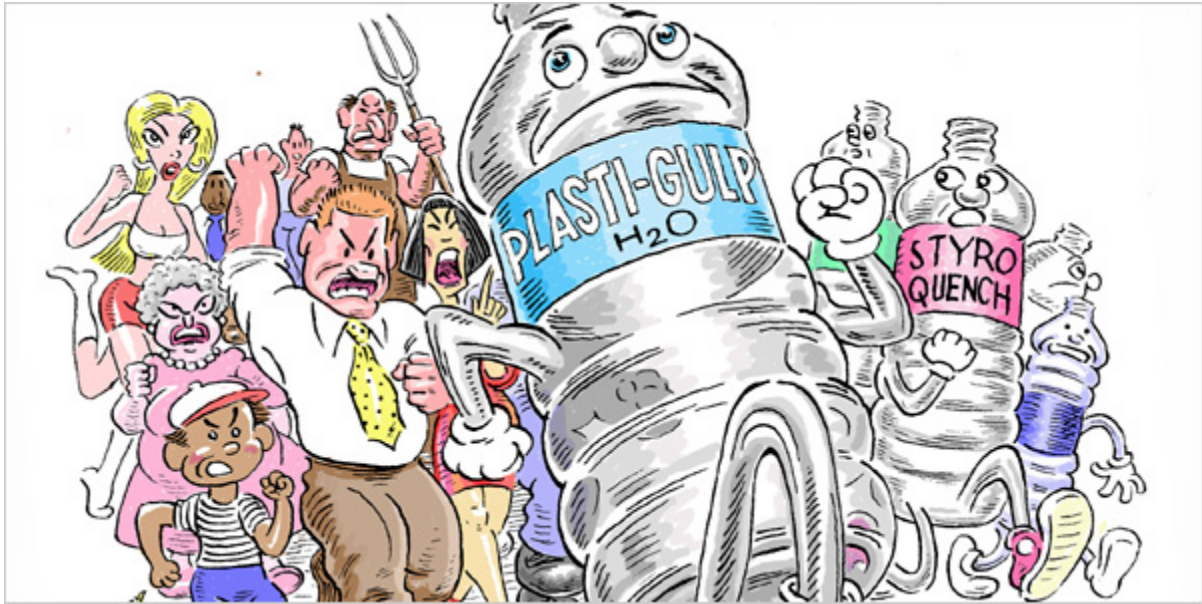


Water, Water Everywhere, but Guilt by the Bottleful

by Alex Williams

(The New York Times) - ON a recent family vacation in Cape Cod, Jenny Pollack, 40, a novelist and public relations associate from Brooklyn, did something she knew she would come to regret. She did it on the spur of the moment. She did it because she felt desperate.



Besides, the giant illuminated Dasani vending machine was just standing there, like a beacon.

So, with her reusable plastic Nalgene bottles dry and her son Charlie working up a thirst in an indoor playground, she broke down and bought a bottle of water. To most people it would be a simple act of self-refreshment, but to Ms. Pollack it was also a minor offense against the planet — think of all the oil used to package, transport and refrigerate that water.

“Something about it felt like a betrayal,” said Ms. Pollack, who otherwise does not consider herself an ardent environmentalist. She said she decided to stop buying water after hearing friends talk about the impact of America’s bottled water habit. And now she is doing what she can to spread the word.

“I’ve pretty much said to every single one of my friends, ‘Can I tell you my spiel about bottled water?’ ”

How unlikely, that at the peak of a sweltering summer, people on playgrounds, in parks, and on beaches are suddenly wondering if an ice-cold bottle of fresh water might be a bad thing.

In the last few months, bottled water — generally considered a benign, even beneficial, product — has been increasingly portrayed as an environmental villain by city leaders, activist groups and the media. The argument centers not on water, but oil. It takes 1.5 million barrels a year just to make the plastic water bottles Americans use, according to the Earth Policy Institute in Washington, plus countless barrels to transport it from as far as Fiji and refrigerate it.

The issue took a major stride into mainstream dialogue earlier this summer, after the mayors of San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Minneapolis and New York began urging people to opt for tap water instead of bottled.

This added momentum to efforts by environmental groups like Corporate Accountability International and Food & Water Watch, which have been lobbying citizens to dump the bottle; environmental organizations had banded together in several states to pressure governments to extend bottle bills to include bottled water. Several prominent restaurateurs, like Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., made much-publicized moves to drop bottled water from their menus.

AND so people who had come to consider bottled water a great convenience, or even a mark of good taste, are now casting guilty glances at their frosty drinks.

Daphne Domingo Johnson, a life coach who also works for a nonprofit organization in Seattle, said she used to keep a case of bottled water "in my trunk for all times, just because I know the importance of water." Ms. Johnson, 35, said she thought of reusable plastic Nalgene bottles — recently reborn as urban status symbols — as "just for backpackers or athletes."

Now, after reading news reports about the debate over bottled water, Ms. Johnson said, the rare bottles she buys feel "like a guilty pleasure." She helped mount an antibottled water campaign at work, posting fliers trumpeting environmental reasons why people should drink tap water instead of the free Crystal Geyser her employer provides.

She is not alone. In interviews last week with dozens of people on sun-baked streets around the country, former and current bottled water devotees showed a new awareness of the issue's complexities.

Some have already changed their ways.

Melissa Frawley, 38, a banker in Atlanta, said she recently broke her Evian habit after news reports altered her thinking. Environmentalism, she concluded, "is sometimes an inconvenience to us all, but it is something I think we all need to do."

Others who had not changed their habits were nevertheless feeling a new sense of guilt.

Barry Eskandani, 31, an administrative assistant in San Francisco who considers himself a connoisseur of water brands, said that lately his fellow Bay Area residents act as if "you just killed their puppy" if you dare throw a bottle in the garbage.

Bottled water has now overtaken coffee and milk in sales nationally, and is catching up with beer. To some, it's an affordable luxury. To others, a healthy alternative to sugary drinks.

Regardless, many consider it a staple.



BOTTLED WHAT? To avoid the public guilt, you could always do what the Boy Scouts did in the 1940s.

Over the last 15 years, the bottled water industry has been astonishingly successful in turning a product that once seemed an indulgence into a daily companion. Savvy marketers even managed to recast this mundane product as a talisman of sexiness — Jennifer Aniston is the new face of Glacéau SmartWater.

But the fickleness of fashion may be tilting against the industry.

In preparation for New York Fashion Week this September, Aveda has an agreement with several design labels, including 3.1 Phillip Lim, Rodarte, Temperley London, Thakoon and Marc Bouwer to use recycled aluminum bottles for the water served to models and stylists backstage.

Word is spreading. An editorial on Aug. 1 in The New York Times, "In Praise of Tap Water," argued against bottled water on the ground that "this country has some of the best public water supplies in the world." The piece was high on the list of the most e-mailed articles for several days.

And the industry is feeling the heat. Last week, the International Bottled Water Association took out full-page newspaper advertisements urging consumers to recycle, not abandon, their bottles and arguing that "when we drink any beverage, it's likely to come out of a bottle or a can."

Some interviewed last week agreed with that viewpoint.

"There are two separate issues — one is water, the other is plastic bottles," said Paul Pentel, a physician in Minneapolis. "We have been trying to steer people away from the liquid candy — juices, pop and everything else," he added. "From that standpoint, water is good, and I'm very hesitant to demonize bottled water."

Indeed, some people wonder why environmentalists have singled out bottled water, and not dish detergent or Wiffle Ball bats.

Jessica Retan, a 22-year-old nanny who lives in Harlem, was sipping from a bottle of Poland Spring in Central Park on a hot Saturday. The waste issue, she said, is "concerning, but there's Coke, shampoo — a lot of things in addition to water that are bottled in plastic. So I'm curious, why just focus on bottled water?"

Gigi Kellett of Corporate Accountability International's Think Outside the Bottle campaign said environmental efforts targeting bottled water are a good starting point because water "is something that people can have access to right out of the taps."

"It's a way to protect the environment and protect your pocketbook," she said, adding that most empty bottles end up not in recycling bins but in the garbage.

All that discarded plastic also bothers Barbara Kancelbaum, a freelance writer in Park Slope. "It's not like the bottles that carry water are worse than bottles carrying Pepsi," said Ms. Kancelbaum, 42, who was so moved by the sight of overflowing garbage cans in Prospect Park that she posted an antibottled water message on an online bulletin board for local mothers. "The problem is that the water industry has exploded, so that there are many, many more bottles being used than there were before."

"The solution," she said, "is not to buy other kinds of drinks. The solution is to bring your own water."

But even the noblest of intentions can wilt in the heat.

Dave Byers, 65, from Silver Spring, Md., discussed the issue with his wife, Pat, on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on a 90-degree Saturday. "I think it should be banned, actually," he said of bottled water.

As he spoke, he and his wife shared a bottle of Poland Spring. They said they felt bad about it, but it was hot. And they could not find a drinking fountain.

"Water is so ubiquitous," he said, glancing at the bottle. "It seems a little dumb to walk around with a bottle of this."