

“Water, Water Everywhere, Nor Any Drop to Drink”: The Costs of Bottled Water

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Readers may recognize the above quote from the poem “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In this time of growing water crisis, there may be drops to drink, but who will get this water and how much will it cost? Can we protect our water commons from the corporate goal of privatization and sale to the highest bidder? Can we turn back the agenda, codified in the international trade agreements, that thwarts the will of the people and overrides democracy?

Over the years, we’ve come to appreciate the challenge of working locally while learning about global water struggles in Bolivia, India, South Africa and elsewhere. WILPF members and branches need to labor on the community and national levels as long as is needed to ensure that the universal right to water is recognized officially and that water is protected as a global commons and a fundamental right of all people and of nature. To this end, we must work toward an internationally binding U.N. treaty. The power to determine the use of water must rest firmly in the hands of the people, not corporations or the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, or other private elites.

WILPF and the International Movement

The international movement for the right to water came of age this year when water activists from around the world gathered in Mexico City at the first International Forum in the Defense of Water, held simultaneously with the 4th World Water Forum. Olivia Zink and I, representing WILPF and wearing headbands emblazoned with “Nestlé Basta Ya” (Nestlé — Enough is Enough), marched with tens of thousand of advocates, many of them high school and college students. We participated in workshops and plenary discussions with representatives of civil society from Mexico and Central and South America, and were inspired to learn that after years of popular struggle in Peru, Bolivia, and Uruguay, national policies to protect the water commons and turn back privatization are being enacted.

In the United States, perhaps the single greatest challenge of the next few years is to challenge the bottled water industry — at the least, to hold steady our consumption of bottled water. After an intense 15-year advertising campaign, the bottled water giants (*see below*) have convinced us to slake our thirst for water any time, any place. What ever happened to public and school water fountains and the metal canteen?

More insidious, the manufacturers of bottled water have convinced us that tap water is not safe, and that buying bottled water at up to 1,000 times the cost of water from a municipal system — that we’ve already paid for with our tax dollars — makes sense. We are being conditioned to look for and accept individual, private, and expensive solutions to local water problems rather than to work with public officials and others to craft communal strategies such as testing the water, identifying and stopping pollution, and adequately funding our public water works.

Small wonder, then, that in the United States bottled water is the fastest-growing beverage sold, with more than \$7.9 billion in sales last year. Today, while sales of beer, coffee and milk are static, those of bottled water outpace all



Nancy Price (in hat, far left) and Olivia Zink (far right), in Mexico City at the first International Forum in the Defense of Water.
Photo: Arthur Cohn.

other beverages except soda pop. The bottled water market has choices to suit every taste: still, fizzy, flavored, and/or “enhanced” with different ingredients: minerals and vitamins for the pregnant and nursing mother; fluoride for the growing child; special trace elements for the athlete; and many more. (How about a “Fountain of Youth” brand for seniors?) Bottled water is now a fashion accessory, the labels small portable billboards for corporations.

Babies’ First Beverage: Bottled Water — It’s Only Natural

Nestlé targets babies before they are weaned. As the world’s largest food and beverage corporation, with annual sales in the tens of billions, it aggressively markets breast-milk substitutes. Some years ago, mothers in developing countries often mixed powdered formula with unsafe water, contributing to thousands of needless infant deaths. As a countermeasure, in 1981, the U.N. World Health Organization adopted an International Marketing Code, intended to help mothers make fully informed choices free of commercial influence. Nestlé continues to violate this code, and because Nestlé Waters markets products in 130 countries, they now freely market bottled water with their instant infant formulas and infant-sized bottles suitable for individual feedings. For these reasons, Nestlé is designated “Corporate Enemy No. 1” in Europe and Baby Milk Action continues its international anti-Nestlé campaign.

Hey, Kids! Try the New Cool Drink — Bottled Water

Now Nestlé and the bottled water barons are cashing in on the drive to improve children's diets and rid schools of soda pop and sweetened juices. The beverage makers have agreed to limit sales of their products in elementary and middle schools to bottled water, juices without artificial sweeteners, and nonfat milk products by the school year 2009-2010. Such "generosity" makes business sense and buys them good will. As an industry expert said, "It's a big land rush now that carbonated soft drinks are getting the boot from schools."

Because many young parents already drink bottled water, they've set an example for their kids. But just to be sure, this past summer Nestlé and others launched a bottled-water campaign targeted to the new 6-12-year-old consumer. Nestlé's new Aquapod brand is promoted with animated ads proclaiming, "Aquapod Springwater: A blast of fun," which flood Nickelodeon and other kids' channels. And the company is touring the country with two giant Aquapod bottles on wheels. "Kids Only" launched its own brand of water, encased in exclusive "collectible" bottles featuring favorite children's characters such as Superman, Scooby-Doo, and Spider-Man.

Parents who challenge marketing bottled water to this age group may be made uncomfortable by other parents and school officials ("C'mon, it's healthier than Coke!"), but most of all, they may feel pressure from their children — just what the corporations want. Will grocery stores now place kids' bottled water near the cash register with the candy?

Hooked on Bottled Water

As there is no ban on high school and college vending of soda pop and specialty drinks, it will be a win-win situation for the big three bottled water companies: Coca-Cola, with its Dasani brand; PepsiCo, with Aquafina, whose products use municipal water with a little extra filtration; and Nestlé, with its U.S. regional brands produced mainly with spring water: Arrowhead and Calistoga, Deer Park, Ice Mountain, Ozarka, Poland Spring, and Zephyrhills.

As students in this age group learn more about corporate issues, they are beginning to take on the beverage industry. They are challenging the "exclusive beverage agreements" that lock out competitors and allow aggressive corporate marketing on campus — even as they advocate for adequate funding of education and join international movements protecting water for all. In particular, students are engaged in a boycott of Coca-Cola and PepsiCo on campuses and support the campaigns in India to hold Coke accountable for depleting and polluting the country's aquifers (see www.indiaresource.org/campaigns/coke).

Perhaps we water activists can encourage high school and college students to create partnerships with elementary

and intermediate schools to mount campaigns to restore public and school water fountains; learn how the plastic manufacturing and transportation involved in producing bottled water wastes non-renewable resources and water (producing 1.3 gallons of wastewater for each gallon of bottled water); and practice water conservation and sustainable use.

Bodies Harmed Without Consent

Though bottled water is touted as purer than that from municipal sources, that is not always the case. Pesticides have been found in Coca-Cola's Dasani brand, and bottled water can contain bacteria and other contaminants potentially harmful to the newborn, the very young, and those with compromised immune systems. The Natural Resources Defense Council has published a research report, *Bottled Water: Pure Drink or Pure Hype?* available on its website: www.nrdc.org/water/drinking/bw/bwinx.asp.

The plastic housing bottled water is another health concern. The new science of bio-monitoring, through the testing of human hair, blood, urine, and even amniotic fluid and breast milk, shows how all types of industrial chemicals accumulate in our bodies. Plastic resins, from their creation to their formation into bottles to their final disposal, create a world-wide toxic trail of land, air, and water pollution that contributes to this lifelong body burden. Because many of these chemicals are similar to our bodies' own estrogen, this extra dose disrupts development, particularly of the fetus and young child.

Alarmingly, evidence connects these chemicals to abnormal fetal development resulting in learning disabilities and hyperactivity in children; genital abnormalities in boys, including DNA damage to sperm and low sperm counts; prostate cancer; early puberty in girls (a possible pre-condition for breast cancer); fertility and endometriosis in women; and conditions affecting insulin resistance (related to diabetes). Perhaps a campaign on the health effects of the plastics encasing bottled water may have an impact upon parents, PTAs, and school administrators. How can we stand by and let the "corporate person" harm our bodies without our consent?

Education and agitation will be key in the movement to protect and democratize water. WILPF's Save the Water campaign will develop and post to the website materials on water as a human right, exclusivity contracts, the anti-Nestlé campaign, and the new science of bio-monitoring. We encourage you to contribute to any and all of these efforts, particularly with your research and writing skills. To get involved, please email water_leadership@wilpf.org. To learn more about water issues, order a copy of the book *Inside the Bottle: An Expose of the Bottled Water Industry* at the Polaris Institute website, www.polarisinstitute.org.

Nancy Price is a member of the leadership team of the Save the Water Campaign.