

Time To Give Up The Bottle

Opinion article by [Ken Hughes](#), September 2007

My wife and I recently returned from a wondrous trip to Cambodia. A constant companion, one that likely staved off many a tropical disease, was bottled water. In a world where open sewers are ubiquitous and running water is a luxury, everyone who can afford it utterly relies on bottled water. That and cell phones, of course.

Bottled water is even more ubiquitous here in the USA, so much so that many Americans use hands-free cell phones to free up a hand to hold a water bottle. But one wonders whether all this convenience comes with the touted health benefits, or whether the disappearance of public water fountains is a sign of a lack of trust in our public water systems.

The truth is that throughout New Mexico we spend millions a year so we can have quality water safe from debilitating diseases. Tap water is much more highly regulated than bottled water and tested way more often for contaminants, except for lead. By contrast, there are no regulations on words put on bottled water labels. And when it comes to taste, tap water often beats out bottled water on a blind test basis.

The Sierra Club has found that Americans annually consume over 8 billion gallons of bottled water yet tosses out 90 percent of the 25 billion plastic water bottles. Making these bottles releases toxics such as benzene and ethylene oxide into the environment. The bottles are used once, and once used, end up in landfills, along streets, and in arroyos.

Then there's the cost. Tap water is probably too low, at .0015 cents per gallon. Filtered water is 13 cents. For bottled water it's a whopping one dollar and twenty seven cents a gallon, according to the American Water Works Association. In 2002, Americans paid \$7.7 billion for bottled water. When it costs 1000 times more for bottled water than tap, no wonder firms such as Nestle, Coke, and Pepsi are making a fortune on bottled water, with the latter two merely bottling tap water with some additional treatment.

The Sierra Club asks that you get off the bottle and

- Use pitchers of water at work and at community events
- Use containers, preferably steel lined, that you can refill with tap water when you are away from home
- If there is a problem with water quality in your community, use a good quality water filter. This is much cheaper than bottled water and does not produce mounds of plastic waste.
- Advocate for adequate funding and good public management of municipal water systems.
- Monitor unusual land purchases near natural springs
- Talk with your solid waste authority to find out how plastic bottles are disposed of. If the bottles are recycled, can you track where they actually go? What reuse is being made of the recycled plastic bottles?

For more information, click on www.sierraclub.org/cac/water

Ken Hughes is Conservation Chair of the Sierra Club's Rio Grande Chapter