

**SUNDAY HERALD COLUMN: January 27, 2008 (HH0804)**

## **THE PLAGUE OF BOTTLED WATER**

by  
**Silver Donald Cameron**

A hundred and sixty-five miles off the coast of Nova Scotia, Sable Island was once a graveyard of shipping. Today it is, among other things, a unique environmental monitoring platform, where universities and government agencies measure weather, the magnetic field of the earth, and the quality and composition of the air and water. Among the pollutants the researchers encounter are pesticides banned since the 1960s but still circulating in the air, contaminants used only in China – and thousands of plastic water bottles.

Plastic water bottles?

Yep. If you want to do something for the environment, and also prove you are not a gullible mutton-head, then stop drinking bottled water – now.

In 1976, the average American drank less than two gallons of bottled water a year. Today, that figure is 30 gallons, and sales are growing at more than 10% a year – faster than any other beverage. Bottled-water companies spend hundreds of millions a year on advertising – and Americans now spend \$15 billion a year on bottled water. No doubt the figures would be comparable in Canada.

But bottled water is a scam, a triumph of brilliant marketing and knavish politics. The bottled-water industry routinely implies that the water from your taps, supplied by a municipal water authority, is not clean enough to drink. It further implies that bottled water is drawn from pristine natural sources, and is naturally cleaner and purer than tap water.

In fact, about 40% of bottled water actually is tap water. The biggest-selling brands are Aquafina, which is owned by Pepsi, and Dasani, which is owned by Coke. As Pepsi was forced to admit last summer, both brands are just filtered tap water -- with an outrageous mark-up.

In Tucson, reports the *Arizona Daily Star*, Aquafina costs \$1.39 per half-litre bottle. The contents come from the Tucson municipal water system, which provides 6.4 gallons for a penny. The Aquafina consumer is paying roughly 7000 times more for the same water.

Furthermore, many bottled-water companies are actually less rigorous in testing for purity and quality than are the municipal systems. One process used to enhance tap water is ozonation, which has a byproduct called bromate, a suspected carcinogen. In 2004, when Coca Cola launched Dasani in the United Kingdom, the company was embarrassed to discover that about half a million bottles were contaminated with excess bromate.

In other words, the quality of the water was better before it was “purified.” The company

withdrew the tainted water – and also withdrew from the UK bottled-water market.

The environmental impact of the bottled-water rip-off is stunning. The US produces 29 billion water bottles every year, using the equivalent of 17 million barrels of oil. The bottles are designed for one-time use, and shouldn't be re-used, because contaminants from the low-grade plastic may leach into the contents. Environmental groups estimate that only about 14% of the bottles are recycled. More than 80% of them end up in landfills, or in places like the beaches of Sable Island.

Once bottled, the product is shipped enormous distances to market, nearly 25% of it travelling far enough to cross a national border before being sold. The Pacific Institute estimates that the energy used for pumping, processing, transportation, and refrigeration represents another 50 million-plus barrels of oil equivalent—enough to run 3 million cars for a year.

The political implications are equally obnoxious. Private water promotion is a steady drumbeat of insinuation that public water supplies are inferior and dangerous, and that private supplies are safe and secure. Just like public schools versus private ones, or public transport versus private cars, or public health care versus private health care.

Happily, municipalities are taking offence. Last June, the U.S. Conference of Mayors noted that their 1100 cities spend \$43 billion a year to provide clean drinking water to citizens – and yet city officials often purchased bottled water for city employees. Led by San Francisco, Salt Lake City and Minneapolis, the group called for an impartial investigation into the environmental effects of bottled water. San Francisco subsequently ordered a complete ban on bottled-water purchases from public funds, as did the state of Illinois. Los Angeles has had such a ban for a decade.

“There's a sucker born every minute,” said circus magnate P. T. Barnum. And what the suckers are sucking on today are beautifully-labelled plastic bottles of water, adorned by blue mountain peaks with white glacier caps.

When gasoline prices rise much above a dollar a litre, consumers vigorously object – but they cheerfully pay three or four times that much for tap water in designer bottles. Barnum would have loved it.