

The Ethics of Bottled Water: *Are Companies That Sell Bottled Water Doing Something Wrong?*

In the past 10-15 years there has been an explosion in the market for bottled water. It is estimated that by 2011, the global market for unflavored, bottled water will be approximately 46 billion gallons per year, or \$86 billion annually⁴. Obviously, a market this large draws the attention of many companies looking to make a profit. There is no reason why these companies should not be allowed to profit from a legitimate consumer demand.

Unfortunately, the topic isn't that straightforward. There are many arguments against legitimate companies selling bottled water. There is the idea that bottled water companies (shortened to BWC's) are creating massive amounts of waste in the form of plastic bottles that take up landfill space. There is the argument that bottled water uses inordinate amounts of energy in transport from its bottling point to its distribution point. There is the argument that tap water is just as good as bottled water in a developed country like the United States. And most recently, as detailed in the book *Blue Gold* by Maude Barlow, there is the argument that water is a human right, and should not be sold in a capitalist market, but rather distributed evenly by the governments of the world⁶. Through this essay, I will show that while BWC's are completely ethical in their current business practices, there is a potential for environmental improvement in their business model.

First, let me address the notion that bottled water is accounting for inordinate amounts of landfill space. This is simply not true. Plastic bottles account for only 0.3% of the nation's solid waste³. This is simply not a statistically significant amount of waste to argue about. The reality is that BWC's have done their share to reduce the amount of waste going into landfills; they've made their containers 100% recyclable through all common recycling chains. The blame rests solely on the consumers and the municipalities running the recycling chains for only recycling

25% of all plastic bottles¹. BWC's do better than many other companies in creating a product with a reasonably sustainable life cycle – although plastic bottles can't be recycled into more plastic bottles, they can be used to produce other forms of plastic that are just as useful.

There are currently only two conceivable ways in which BWC's could further reduce their impact on the environment in the disposal of the bottles. One is to convert to using biodegradable plastics – plastics that completely decompose when exposed to: “high heat, micro-organisms and high moisture levels,” but this is not without its issues². Very few recycling centers in operation today can handle biodegradable plastics as intended, so they quite often end up in landfills where they don't decompose at all. The other option is to convince consumers to switch to reusable bottles. These bottles already exist on the market and the fact that both types of bottles sell well is evidence that consumers have needs for both types of bottles – so this is not a viable option.

Next, there is the argument that bottled water uses an inordinate amount of energy to transport it from the bottling source to the distribution point. This is a fallacious argument. The cost of transport is included in the price of any product, and all products must be transported from their point of creation to their point of distribution – bottled water is no different. Consumers have continuously proven that they are willing to pay this premium for the conveniences that bottled water offers. These are publicly traded companies interested in making a profit in the bottling and distribution of water: if there were a way for them to save money in transport and offer the same product, they would implement it in the interest of increased profits. However, if BWC's were not solely concerned about the bottom line, but were also interested in improving their environmental image in transport, they might look into more fuel-efficient

distribution methods or bottles that waste less space when packed (e.g. rectangular rather than round).

Another common argument against BWC's is the presumption that bottled water is no cleaner or better than tap water. On the whole, bottled water is held to higher standards of purity over tap water because the bottling plants are self contained and the pipes are easy to maintain, whereas municipal water systems may have pipes that are decades old and made of lead or other harmful materials. The FDA regulates bottled water quality while the EPA regulates tap water. Both organizations use similar guidelines, but the FDA's are stricter in some areas. There are four classifications for bottled water - Artesian, Mineral, Purified, Spring – and each one carries with it different requirements for where the water must come from and what is allowed to be in it⁵. Every bottle of water must be labeled with which of these types it is. All four types are tested to ensure they don't have excessive levels of any contaminants, but the one closest to pure H₂O is purified water. In emergency situations, local tap water can be contaminated beyond the levels that it was tested at, making it unsafe for consumption. In these cases, bottled purified water is frequently used, even required, in emergency situations for its reliable purity. This is one function of bottled water that cannot be replaced by tap water.

In the book *Blue Gold*, Maude Barlow argues that water is a human right that should be controlled by governments, not corporations⁶. This is a respectable request and an interesting debate for another forum, but the decision is presented as a mutually exclusive one when it doesn't have to be. Our system of water distribution in the United States is a perfect example of how the two – government and corporations – can work together to create a sort of two-tiered water delivery system. The lower tier, the one that every citizen is entitled to, is access to running water that is certified to be safe for consumption by a federally run agency – the EPA.

The upper tier, the one accessible to those that can afford it, is bottled water. Bottled water satisfies the citizens who want more than just hydration from their water.

Bottled water serves people who are on the go without time to fill up a reusable bottle. It serves people who use it as a status symbol, or who want a taste of a distant country. It serves emergency workers who need a source for reliably clean water in the midst of a disaster. And the companies that bottle and distribute this water serve all of these people with business practices that are nothing but ethical. They create a product that is 100% recyclable and certifiably sanitary. They deliver this product to consumers through standard methods of distribution. They follow all labeling guidelines set by the government to inform consumers as to where the water was sourced. And they do all this through publicly registered, non-monopolistic companies. Although they may have an environmental footprint that isn't as small as it could be, bottled water companies can't be considered anything but ethical businesses.

Works Cited

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