



Healthy people and places

A QUESTION OF WATER: THE TAP VS. THE BOTTLE

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As Americans, we take the availability of clean water so much for granted that when arriving in exotic places we are unpleasantly surprised when discovering that the tap water in our hotel is unhealthy.

Yet even with our easy access to good tap water, it seems that we have been persuaded that attractively packaged and branded bottles of water offer us something better than what we get from the tap - convinced enough to spend \$15 billion annually on bottled water.

While the bottlers use images of springs, mountains and glaciers to imply that their product comes from "natural" sources, in reality up to 40 percent of their product actually comes from municipal tap water.

The industry would also have us believe that their product is purer than tap water and free of harmful chemicals and micro-organisms. However research suggests that about a third of all bottled water is contaminated. Our own Public Health laboratory has found bacteria and some chemical contaminants in bottled water at levels above the acceptable range for municipal drinking water. One might ask - how can this be if they are more strictly regulated than tap water. In fact up to 70 percent of bottle water sold in the United States is exempt from regulation and none of it is tested by the FDA. In contrast, municipal water utilities including Madison are obliged to test very frequently.

Bottled water is a lot more expensive than tap water. With an average bottle of water retailing for around \$1.50, and assuming that the average person consumes about 57 gallons per year, an exclusive user of bottled water would be paying around \$548 for that one-year supply. Based on current Madison Water Utility rates, that same amount of clean tap water would cost about 10 cents. The \$1.50 investment in one bottle would actually buy 900 gallons of tap water.

Bottled water requires large amounts of energy for processing, bottling, transportation, and disposal creating a substantial carbon footprint.

It takes about 17 million barrels of oil per year to manufacture the bottles we use, creating 900,000 tons of plastic along with the toxic emissions produced in the process. Only 15 to 35 percent of the bottles are recycled – leaving about 38 billion plastic water bottles a year in our landfills, with many winding up in the oceans contributing to the formation of enormous garbage islands.

Bottled water makes sense when we go to places where water quality may be compromised or during emergencies. But does it also make sense to buy your water in a store when municipal tap water consistently wins the cost and quality race by such a wide margin? Unfortunately these simple facts about tap water quality have been aggressively obscured by the millions of dollars spent on advertising by water bottlers to convince us that we really need their expensive and inferior product.