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Bottled and Sold: The Story Behind Our Obsession with Bottled Water

Peter H. Gleick
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"Every second of every day in the United States a thousand people buy and open up a plastic bottle of commercially produced water," Peter H. Gleick writes, "and every second of every day in the United States a thousand plastic bottles are thrown away." The hitch is that very few of these people are very far from a faucet where they might easily and safely quench their thirst. Why aren't they using the tap or a water fountain to get a drink?

By now, most of us know we live in an age of unparalleled consumption, climate change, dwindling resources, species extinction, habitat destruction, and rising global human population. For decades, many saw Big Oil as society's nemesis, responsible at least in part for some of these ills; then Big Energy and Big Pharmaceutical loomed large. Now the force to be reckoned with is Big Water. In the last decade, Big Water has taken over much of what we can't see; millions and millions of gallons of water are pumped, on a daily basis, from the aquifers under our feet and processed into bottled water.

We take bottles of this water with us everywhere…to the beach, to meetings, biking, and hiking. Ironically, we carry it into public places where water is readily available, and as Gleick reveals, public water is often cleaner and healthier than the stuff we buy for two bucks a bottle.

Given our water-toting habits, we must read Gleick's book with more than a little sense of guilt. *Bottled and Sold* outlines our growing dependence on a re-packaged natural resource which is sold via all the age-old techniques: fear, deception, and sex appeal. Take the myth-making behind the brand names of bottled water: "Yosemite" brand comes from the Los Angeles municipal water system. "Everest" brand, complete with a snow-covered mountain on the label, comes from southeastern Texas.

Maybe, in this untruth-in-advertising age, we're willing to let the brand names dress things up a bit. But consider the actual source of this water. Isn't that something we ought to know? As Gleick writes, "Until mid-2007 bottles of Aquafina offered no indication that the water originates from local tap water systems, and even today, it has a lovely logo designed like a mountain range. Curious consumers might have seen a small "P.W.S." on the label, but until advocacy groups pressured the company to spell out "public water source," most consumers probably had no idea that they were drinking reprocessed tap water."

This is just the beginning of Gleick's inquiry. *Bottled and Sold* asks serious questions: Why do we buy bottled water? Where does it come from? Is it as safe as tap water? What about the plastic? Where do these bottles go when we throw them out? What are the environmental and social consequences of bottled water use for the planet?

This book answers all of these complex questions in a straight-forward, clear-eyed, sensible fashion. Gleick covers the topic in illuminating detail, yet he packages his writing with the skill and passion of a novelist. Supported by research, including interviews and plant visits, Gleick examines how water is found, pumped, bottled, treated, lied about, and sold to a relatively unsuspecting public. If selling bottled water is a shell game, Gleick picks the right shell every time.

In his pursuit of the real story, Gleick does not come off as a wild-eyed activist ready to snatch that bottle of Evian out of your mouth, but neither is he afraid to confront Big Water. *Bottled and Sold* points fingers, names names, and exposes the underlying greed that literally drains a free-flowing public resource supply and uses it to turn a private profit. The last chapter outlines strategies for citizens concerned about this misuse and the future of water. Big Water's tactics, by the way, have recently met with fierce citizen opposition and in many states, including Michigan,

citizens have banded together, raised money, and successfully fought to require companies like Nestlé to reduce their pumping of public waters and the resultant damage to water ecosystems.

Bottled and Sold is a necessary book: we are surely in for serious water damage in the future if we continue to drink our water from bottles. Every citizen should read it; every legislator and state natural resource administrator should have a desk copy. Lobbyists who prowl the halls of Congress seeking to overturn long-standing common water laws ought to be made to read this, twice. It seems impossible that a reader would come away from Gleick's book with a desire to ever buy another plastic bottle of water. It's that compelling.

MICHAEL DELP (April 15, 2010)

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