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Turn on the Tap

By Nancy Reigel

Thirsty? Want to do one quick, easy maneuver to lower or maintain your current eco-footprint? Turn on the tap!

Several MountainKeeping columns have pointed out the value of buying and eating local foods. Well, even we grocery-store junkies can do this ... shun bottled water and drink from our local taps.

The first and most obvious reason is that water is heavy. Getting bottled water from its distant source to our hot hands is an energy-guzzling process. It's the production of all that energy, and its noxious byproducts, that we should all be trying to reduce.

Making all those plastic water bottles is also an oil-guzzling process. According to Earth Policy Institute (EPI), making bottles to meet Americans' demand for bottled water requires more than 1.5 million barrels of oil annually, enough to fuel some 100,000 U.S. cars for a year.

In addition, the bottles themselves are contaminating the environment. About 86 percent of plastic water bottles in the U.S. become garbage or litter, according to the Container Recycling Institute in Washington, D.C. Plastic debris in the environment can take between 400 and 1,000 years to degrade.

Finally, from a financial perspective, bottled water is expensive, up to 10,000 times more expensive than tap water. And this expense is driven not by the cost of the water itself (which is the very smallest cost component of the product) but by the cost of packaging, transportation (nearly a quarter of all bottled water crosses national boundaries to reach consumers, says EPI), and, yes, marketing and advertising. Yep, Madison Avenue gets its share.

So what are some of the reasons given for drinking bottled water? Some believe it is purer and safer than tap water. Not so says the National Resources Defense Council. In their reports on the results of a four-year study, they state, "There is no assurance that just because water comes out of a bottle, it is any cleaner than water from a tap." In fact, according to some sources, as much as 40% of bottled water IS tap water. That is certainly true of Aquafina (bottled by Pepsi) which is, indeed, tap water.

Here's a question one *must* ask: "Why is it okay for multi-national corporations to make money pumping water from one area of the world and shipping it off to another area, especially when the original site actually needs the water much more than the destination site?"

For instance, French-owned Nestle corporation was pumping 720,000 gallons of water a day from a shallow aquifer in Michigan, resulting in a two-inch drop in the level of that aquifer. This exploitation of local water for bottling also caused an area wetland to lose up to 75% of its open water and a local lake level to fall up to six inches.

Is there a legitimate argument for drinking bottled water? Certainly in countries and areas of the world where there is no safe drinking-water supply, bottled water is a life and health necessity. And even here in the high country, there are some people who cannot drink the water from their wells because of high-mineral content or acidity. But that is true for a small, small minority of us.

For the rest ... there's no reason on God's green earth not to turn on the tap!