

Misconceptions about bottled water

By Martina Rowley

Water is a life source. While some countries have an abundance, others suffer from severe drought or lack of access to safe drinking water due to insufficient infrastructure.

Our planet is 71 percent water, yet 97 percent of it is locked into ocean and lake saltwater, leaving only 3 percent drinkable and accessible. This makes it exceptionally important to protect and value water. For one-third of Canadians, bottled water is now their primary source of drinking water. In most places, this is not necessary and often not safer.

In some communities and on some occasions bottled water is necessary; typically limited to natural disasters, places lacking the infrastructure or when you travel to countries with known risks. Our drinking water in Orangeville comes from 12 wells that tap into local aquifers, i.e. large, natural underground water reservoirs, and there are two grade-level and one elevated water storage reservoir. The water treatment plant works around the clock to purify our water, staff test the distribution system around twice daily and wells weekly, with additional sampling and testing (Town of Orangeville 2017 Annual Water Works Report). Ontario's Chief Drinking Water Inspector confirms, 99.8 per cent of municipal drinking water meets Ontario's strict drinking water quality standards.

I must admit, Orangeville tap water often tastes awful but to improve it, and to limit my own cost and plastic waste, I use the cheapest home-filtration system, aka Brita filter. I do anything possible to avoid drinking water from plastic bottles because I dislike them with a passion! Here is why.

Manufacturing, transporting and disposing of plastic water bottles is a massive source of energy use and pollution. Bottles are made from crude oil and natural gas, using over 17 million barrels of oil globally every year to produce and 2,000 times more energy than tap water. The bottles' softness and durability mean they do not biodegrade for hundreds of years when in landfill. Recycle them, you say? Ottawa-based Polaris Institute estimates only 14 per cent of plastic water bottles get recycled in Ontario and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency states that in 2015, as much as 75 per cent of all municipal plastic waste went to landfill.

The most common reasons for preferring bottled over tap water are convenience, taste and perceived safety ? the latter being a misconception. Independent market research company Canadean says at least two out of every five bottles of water sold globally are purified municipal water ? not the ?natural spring water? and ?pure?, as they are marketed. The big three international water companies ? Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Nestlé ? take at least two of their main Canadian brands from municipal water systems in Brampton and Mississauga (Dasani and Aquafina).

The problem is bottling plants are not provincially regulated. Instead, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency tests water bottling plants only every 2-3 years. In 2010, only 6 per cent of bottled water factories were tested (16 of 282) and since 2000, 27 out of 49 bottled water brands were recalled by the Canadian Food Agency. An international study showed 40 per cent of sampled bottles had bacterial or fungal contamination (Polaris Institute, Inside the Bottle). Studies also find bacterial, fungal or chemical contamination, as well as tiny pieces of plastic in bottled water.

Then there are the politics of privatising public water sources. These corporations draw thousands of gallons of fresh water from local wells, aquifers, streams and lakes for absolute pittance, reducing water resources of farmers and nearby communities. This happens in Canada and other countries. In 2011, Nestlé Waters Canada applied for a 10-year permit to take 3.6 million litres of water daily at their Aberfoyle site (also Guelph's municipal drinking water source) for a mere \$3.71 per one million litres of water. Local community organisation Wellington Water Watchers, environmental lawyers from Ecojustice and Council of Canadians fought for a limit to daily water-takings. In 2013, Nestlé withdrew from this legal battle but they, and others, continue threatening community water sources with planned water takings in Elora, Alliston, and other communities around the world. Privatisation and selling of public water are an international threat and rightfully being fought as an affront to Human Rights. And for that, you pay

around 1,000 times more for bottled water than for tap!

I implore you to save your money and reduce plastic waste by drinking tap water (use a filter) and taking your own refillable bottle when you go out. The Town of Orangeville will hopefully follow other municipalities and school boards and ban plastic bottle water use and sale at all their meetings and facilities!

For details and inspiration, watch 'The Story of Bottled Water' at <http://storyofstuff.org/movies/story-of-bottled-water> and Toronto-born film-makers Alex and Tyler Miflin's 'Bottlegate'.