

# Bluwashing

## Why the Bottled Water Industry's EcoFriendly Claims Don't Hold Water

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Corporations have a financial incentive to hide the environmental impacts of their industries from an American public that is increasingly concerned with buying environmentally friendly products. As consumers are looking for ways to “go green,” many companies have been accused of “greenwashing” — promoting products as environmentally friendly when they actually damage the environment. Today, as the global media has brought heightened attention to global water scarcity, blue is the new green — and corporations appear to be using similar “bluwashing” tactics to obscure their effect on the world’s water.



The bottled water industry is a prime example of a corporate sector threatened by this new consumer environmental consciousness that is using misleading marketing tactics.

### **Bottled Water Sales Are Declining**

When bottled water sales dropped in 2008, media and industry analysts said the fall was partially due to an overall economic downturn.<sup>1</sup> For cash-strapped consumers, it makes more sense to pay \$0.002 to \$0.003 per gallon for tap water than hundreds to thousands more for water in a bottle.<sup>2</sup>

But this was not the whole story — The Washington Post, National Public Radio and Beverage Marketing Corporation all reported that the drop was likely also due to a growing awareness of the environmental impacts of the product.<sup>3</sup> This is probably why the industry’s largest players are now trying hard to present themselves as environmentally friendly, despite the detrimental effects of their product.

### **Bluwashing the Bottled Water Industry**

Today, the bottled water industry appears to be selling itself as a good water steward to distract from its impacts on the world’s water. While the United Nations established March 22 as World Water Day to bring international attention to the world water crisis, bottled water companies use it to advertise their donations to water charities or efforts to re-



duce the amount of water they use in their manufacturing.<sup>4</sup> These messages distract from the water problems associated with the product.

Bottled water is inherently water-intensive. The 8.7 billion gallons of water sold in 2008<sup>5</sup> were taken from the envi-

## Donations to Water Charities

The biggest bottling companies are eager to boost their water-friendly image by advertising the amount of money they give to water charities. There is great need to address the world's water problems, as 2.6 billion people live in households without proper sanitation, 1.1 billion people do not have access to improved drinking water and the World Health Organization estimates that it would take \$11.3 billion per year to achieve the most basic of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.<sup>28</sup>

But the amounts of money that the companies donate pale in comparison to the amount they use for the rest of their operations. Nestlé Waters North America advertises its contributions to the Red Cross and support for Project WET,<sup>29</sup> but the company's total giving of \$2.6 million is only 0.07 percent of its total revenues of \$3.8 billion.<sup>30</sup> Pepsi's donations of \$15 million over three years are little compared to the 43 billion dollars the company took in overall in 2008.<sup>31</sup> Pepsi's Aquafina brand alone took in \$1.3 billion in revenues in 2008.<sup>32</sup> Starbucks advertises the 5 cents per bottle it donates to a water fund for every bottle of Ethos Water it sells for \$1.80 per bottle, but does not mention the \$360 million it would take in by the time it reaches its goal of raising \$10 million for water projects.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, these donations do nothing to address the specific impacts that the bottled water industry has on local water resources.

ronment, packaged in plastic and often shipped long distances. Spring water is a special concern because it often comes from groundwater sources that are environmentally sensitive.<sup>6</sup> In general, groundwater pumping is a concern because groundwater connects to surface water, and when it is pulled out of the ground faster than it is naturally replenished, water levels decline both underground and in surrounding rivers, lakes and wetlands.<sup>7</sup> Community groups in California, New Hampshire and Michigan have opposed bottling plants in their communities due to concerns about the effects on the local water.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, bottled water manufacturing uses more water than just the water that goes in the bottle. The Pacific Institute estimates that for every liter of water in a PET bottle, two liters of water are used to make the plastic and bottle the water.<sup>9</sup> Given that the industry sold 8.7 billion gallons in the United States in 2008, water bottlers used about 26 billion gallons of additional water in the production and bottling of the product that year.<sup>10</sup>

Coca-Cola, Nestlé Waters North America and PepsiCo all participated in the Corporate Water Footprinting Conference in 2009 to discuss how they are "leading the way in freshwater management and reduction."<sup>11</sup> Yet as long as these companies profit from the water itself, they will never have incentive to use less overall water. For example, Nestlé says that in 2007 it reduced the amount of water used in its manufacturing process by 1.3 percent, but it increased production by 10 percent.<sup>12</sup> This means the overall amount of water used actually increased by 363 million gallons.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Coca-Cola claims that it is going to go "water neutral." Water neutrality was defined by Coca-Cola and several academic partners as measuring its water footprint, taking steps to reduce it, and making up for the water it uses in one location by sponsoring water improvements

elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Yet water neutrality is a fundamentally problematic concept because the value of water is not the same in all contexts, and water is a local resource.<sup>15</sup> Reducing the quantity of water taken from another watershed will do nothing to compensate for the loss to the original watershed. And, the definition of water neutrality that six organizations came up with is not actually reducing the net impact to zero, but rather doing everything “reasonably possible” to reduce its footprint and make up the difference.<sup>16</sup> As long as “reasonable” is up to Coca-Cola’s own interpretation, its claims of going water neutral are unlikely to significantly change its overall water use.

## Greenwashing the Bottled Water Industry

Water use is not the only environmental problem the industry has incentive to cover up. The industry has been criticized for its environmental damage due to its high energy use and production of plastic waste. The Pacific Institute estimates that bottled water in the United States used the energy equivalent of 32 to 54 million barrels of oil in 2007 — enough to fuel about 1.5 million cars for a year.<sup>17</sup> The manufacture of polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles, water extraction, bottling and distribution amounted to up to 2,000 times the energy cost of producing tap water.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, only one out of every four of the tens of billions of plastic bottles used in the United States in 2006 were recycled.<sup>19</sup> At that rate, millions of tons of empty plastic bottles end up in landfills. In a recent report, the U.S. Government Accountability Office quoted waste industry experts who claimed that for the purpose of landfill management, these bottles will “never decompose.”<sup>20</sup>

In order to present a greener image, the industry is proclaiming its commitment to recycling through press releases on America Recycles Day,<sup>21</sup> and advertising new lighter bottles<sup>22</sup> or bottles made out of plants.<sup>23</sup> Nestlé even commissioned a peer-reviewed study which concluded that bottled water has the lightest environmental footprint among packaged drink alternatives.<sup>24</sup> Yet these efforts do not make bottled water environmentally friendly. Even if plastic bottles are thinner, they are still likely to end up in the trash. Coca-Cola’s new “PlantBottles” are not as green as they sound — they are still PET plastic, although one of the components of the plastic is made from sugar cane rather than petroleum. Nestlé’s press release about its study distracts from its own finding: that tap water has the smallest water and carbon footprint of all.<sup>25</sup>

## Attack on the Tap

As long as water is sold in plastic bottles and shipped around the world, the industry will continue to use water, consume energy and generate waste. The best way to avoid these impacts is to drink tap water, which has a lower water footprint than bottled water, a lower carbon footprint than bottled water and does not use plastic packaging at all.

## CEO Water Mandate

Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Nestlé have all signed on to the CEO Water Mandate — a part of the United Nations’ Global Compact program in which multinational corporations commit to working to address the global water crisis.<sup>34</sup> The CEO Water Mandate, as well the UN Global Compact, has been criticized as a lot of talk and little action; because it is not binding, companies can sign on without actually changing their behavior.<sup>35</sup> In 2010, the CEO Water Mandate received a greenwashing award from the organizers of the Public Eye Awards, an annual event organized to coincide with the World Economic Forum to shame corporate players for their environmentally damaging practices.<sup>36</sup>

## Selling Water to Kids

The bottled water industry is also using the childhood obesity epidemic to paint a more positive picture of itself. The industry is selling itself as a healthy alternative to soda. For example, Nestlé is funding research into the health benefits of water, and even selling water to kids using packaging specifically designed for children, such as in Nestlé’s “Aquapod” bottle.<sup>37</sup> Yet teaching kids to drink bottled water is teaching them to make a less environmentally friendly choice. Tap water has the same health benefits as bottled water without the impacts. A recent article in the New York Times reported that school water fountains can lower a child’s risk for becoming overweight.<sup>38</sup>

Yet the bottled water industry’s attempts to sell packaged water appear to have had negative effects on the country’s drinking water supplies as well. Messages that bottled water is the ideal source of water likely contributed to a decline in consumer confidence in tap water, which means less support for public drinking water. As bottled water sales steadily increased in the last 10 years, the federal funding for water infrastructure systematically declined, contributing to poorly funded water systems that can further compromise public confidence in drinking water.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

Many American consumers are seeing through the industry’s marketing tactics and joining a nationwide movement to Take Back the Tap. College campuses, municipalities, event planners and restaurants around the country have jumped on board to stop drinking or selling bottled water.<sup>27</sup> But as more and more people are turning back to the tap, it is not enough to simply stop buying bottled water. The public must also invest in public water infrastructure so that tap water remains a safe, affordable source of environmentally friendly drinking water. A federal Clean Water Trust Fund would accomplish this goal by providing a dedicated source of funding for public water infrastructure.

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