

Water world

Despite the fact that our clean, safe drinking water is available at the turn of a tap, we spend millions annually on bottled water. DEBORAH BOGLE investigates why.



AT the base of a steep, fern-clad slope not far from the Mt Lofty summit, several black plastic pipes – about the diameter of a man’s thumb – protrude from the rocky cliff face. Rather than the bubbling spring of crystal-clear mountain water I’d pictured, the pipes are a bit of an anticlimax.

Ian Bailey, whose family has drawn water from these natural springs for the past 48 years, assures me that these are genuine springs which flow unaided from the aquifer running along the uppermost slopes of his steep, 16ha property in the Piccadilly Valley.

Once market gardeners, his family abandoned horticulture, unable to compete with mechanised operations on flatter ground, and turned to harvesting what nature gave them for free – the clear, cold water that goes into their Crystal Spring brand of packaged water.

“We thought there had to be something better than this,” says Bailey of the family’s hard-yakka horticulture days.

And there was. The quality of Bailey’s water – he says it regularly gets top billing in comparative tests with other brands – means it’s sought after by other brands. Only 20 per cent of spring water packaged at the Crystal Spring plant goes out under its own label, most of it in the 1.3 million 10-litre casks packaged each year.

The rest bears the brand of market leaders, smaller local labels and generic supermarket lines, or goes out in bulk tankers at the rate of around 50,000 litres a week.

All up, Bailey estimates that 20 million litres annually are shipped from the Crystal Spring plant, nearly half of the 50 million litres collected and sold by South Australian spring water companies each year.

Industry estimates put the amount of packaged water consumed in Australia at 600 million litres annually, which averages out at 28 litres for every man, woman and child in the country. As Bailey has discovered, packaging and selling nature’s bounty makes good business sense.

Continued 10

A good drop . . . Crystal Spring owner Ian Bailey at the entrance to a cave near his water source below Mt Lofty summit. Picture: GRANT NOWELL.



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There are concerns about the environmental impact . . . and the



From 9

Despite the fact that our clean, safe drinking water is available at the turn of a tap, we spend millions annually on bottled water.

Crystal Spring is part of an Australian industry that in 2005 earned revenues of almost \$300 million. In little more than a decade, it has carved itself a significant slice of the market for non-alcoholic beverages, growing by nearly 10 per cent annually.

Coca-Cola Amatil, which owns market leaders Mount Franklin, Neverfail and Pump (which is purified tap water), reported in 2006 that its non-carbonated beverages sector (which includes Spring Valley Juice and Powerade) grew by 9 per cent and accounted for 22 per cent of its total earnings.

Globally, the industry is worth \$60 billion a year. In the U.S., according to a new book, *Bottlemania*, by Elizabeth Royte, sales of packaged water vaulted 170 per cent between 1997 and 2006, from \$US4 billion (\$4.2 billion) to \$US10.8 billion.

Americans now drink more bottled water than they do milk or beer. Royte adds that some estimates project that by 2011, sales of bottled water will even surpass those of America's favourite drink – soda. They glug 250 litres of fizzy soft drink a person each year.

With figures like those, who wouldn't want to get into the bottled-water business?

But lately, there's been something of a backlash. The subtitle of Royte's book, *How Water Went on Sale and Why We Bought It*, encapsulates the sentiment behind a small but vocal and growing, campaign against packaged water.

There are concerns about the environmental impact, from the manufacture and disposal of plastic bottles to the energy used in transporting water from source to customer and powering fridges and coolers to chill it, the sustainability of aquifers and the impact on surface water sources. And dentists are worried that kids who drink bottled water aren't getting the fluoride that's in tap water.

In office buildings, public and private, bottled water coolers are beginning to look decidedly outre. Some employers, like News Limited, for example, are going back to the tap, offering filtered water instead. Green, after all, is cool and bottled water is acquiring an environmentally unfriendly image.

Royte documents the backlash in *Bottlemania*. Activists' first target was not water, but oil, she writes – “specifically, the 17 million barrels it takes each year to make water bottles for the U.S. market”. That doesn't include those other costs for transportation, refrigeration and disposal. One estimate of the amount of energy that goes into a single bottle would be equivalent to filling that bottle a quarter-full with oil.

Some bottled water companies in the U.S. responded to the backlash – which gathered strength last year – by donating a portion of profits to charities that fund water projects in Third World countries. In Paris, writes Royte, Pierre Cardin designed a water cafe and distributed it free to 30,000 Parisian restaurants.

In Sydney, high-profile chef Kylie Kwong has dropped bottled water from her menu. That's all very well for a restaurateur with a national media profile and thriving inner-city business in the country's largest metropolitan, but for others – like Adelaide restaurateur Ben Johnston who, with his partner Dominika, owns the Queen St Cafe and city bistro Dom – sales of bottled water are an important contributor to the bottom line. “I need to be able to charge for water because you can't charge enough for food,” he says. “If I could put my prices up by 10 per cent, I could ban bottled water too.”

Jon Dee, co-founder of Planet Ark and the nationwide campaign against plastic bags, plans to use the same community network he mobilised

Crystal clear . . .

Ian Bailey, above, keeps an eye on the Crystal Spring bottling line.

Below, SA Water staff monitor quality in Millbrook Reservoir.

Above right, SA Water's Sam Williams takes a water sample from a tap in metropolitan Adelaide.

The water quality concern figures, inset, are sourced from the SA Water Drinking Water Quality Report, 2007.

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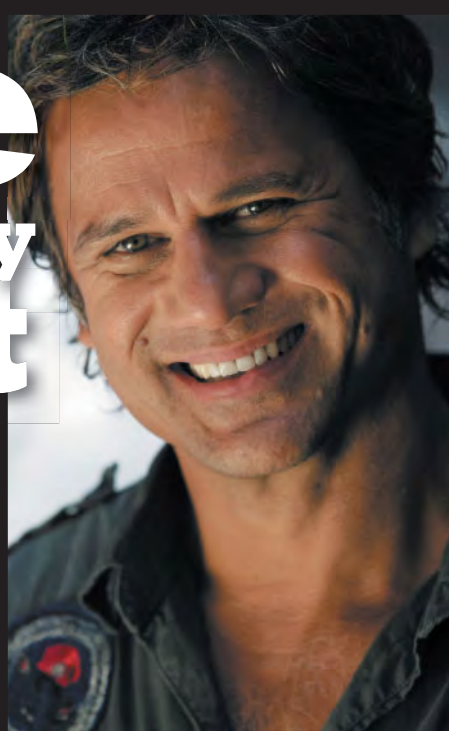
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impact on surface water sources.

TAP WATER QUALITY CONCERNS	2002	2005	2007
Yes, strong concerns	11%	6%	3%
Yes, moderate concerns	24%	15%	8%
No, no real concerns	63%	77%	88%
Can't say	2%	2%	1%



against shopping bags to raise awareness about the costs – both financial and environmental – of our bottled water habit. Already, he has secured the support of six local councils in New South Wales, and South Australian councils are next in his sights. “We’re about to write to every local council in South Australia,” he says.

Dee’s campaign – the Bottled Water Alliance – will soon announce a plan to improve the availability and visibility of filtered tap water at public bubblers, to encourage people to refill bottles. And in the next two to three months, the alliance plans to launch “a very sexy reusable bottle”.

Ian Bailey, who is president of the Spring Water Association of SA, is sensitive about negative publicity, but notes that there’s been no corresponding fall in sales. He counters arguments about the disposal of plastic bottles. Plastic PET bottles use recycled plastic (and some virgin plastic, he admits) and SA’s deposit system ensures most are collected and recycled.

“South Australia is very much ahead of everywhere else in terms of recycling,” he says. “Come September 1, it’s going to be a 10 cent deposit on bottles (up from 5c). Now you can bet your life no kid is going to go past a bottle lying in the street.”

The Australian Bottled Water Institute, the industry’s peak body, claims to have a good story to tell in terms of recycling, trumpeting the fact that 60,000 tonnes of PET have been saved over the past four years because of “light weighting” of bottles. But only 37 per cent of PET bottles (containing not just water, but juice, soft drinks, “household condiments and cleansers”) are recycled, according to a statement published on its website.

On dental health, Food Standards Australia has recommended that water bottlers be permitted to voluntarily add fluoride to selected brands.

Bailey counters questions about the energy used in producing and transporting packaged water with the riposte: “How much energy do you think it takes to get that River Murray water to the tap? It’s pumped from the Murray, it’s put through all sorts of filters, all sorts of chemicals are thrown at it, it goes through miles and miles of pipes . . . all those things take energy. Who’s paying for the tap water? The infrastructure in that. That’s not free.”

Now is not the time, he adds, to be challenging packaged water.

“It’s the worst time in the world to knock spring water because the water in the tap is not going to get any better,” he says. “When the Murray starts to flow again, the salt’s going to come down and it’s going to be a real problem. Some of the country areas just won’t be able to drink their water.”

Research scientist at the Australian Water Quality Centre Jim Morran’s response to such a scenario is – bring it on. “That’ll be great,” he says, grinning widely. “It’ll be easier to treat.”

Scientists at the Bolivar laboratories test up to 4000, 600ml bottles of water a week, drawn from

across the SA Water network, from catchment to tap. Samples are tested for a range of contaminants measured against the guidelines set out in the Australian Drinking Water Quality Management.

Although low water flows in the River Murray system increase the risk of blue-green algae outbreaks, particularly in warmer weather, there has been a corresponding fall in turbidity levels – that is, the water is a lot clearer.

“At the moment, the river throughout the Murray is exceptionally good-quality water because there’s no flow, so all the clays and things are dropping out, and people are actually seeing the banks and the bottom of the river for the first time,” says Morran. “Unfortunately, because it’s so clear it’s very hard to treat. Our plants are designed to deal with dirty water, with lots of clay loading.”

Once flows are restored, delivering clear water through coagulation and flocculation is a relatively simple task, says Morran. But renewed River Murray flows will bring with them other, potentially more serious, challenges.

“When it rains, it’ll be microbiological problems that will be washing in,” says Morran.

“It’ll be crypto and giardia.”

The presence of cryptosporidium and giardia outbreaks, of the kind that compelled Sydney Water to issue a boil-water alert in 1998, are a godsend to the bottled-water industry.

The main complaints about Adelaide water, however, relate to taste and odour, thanks to processes required to clean up the River Murray water which makes up more than 90 per cent of our water supply.

Phil Thomas, Inorganic Chemistry manager at the AWQC, believes South Australians’ taste for bottled water is likely to be a hangover from the days before the first water-treatment plant was commissioned in the early ‘70s.

“We had a bit of catching up to do,” he says. Now, “it’s not so much a health issue; it’s the taste”.

“That’s largely to do with the chlorine,” he adds. “Compared with Sydney and Melbourne, we do have a high level of organic carbon in the water . . . and if you chlorinate that, it does produce some taste compounds . . . so it’s really what’s in the raw water that’s different – not from a health point of view; it’s perfectly safe to drink – but it’s more from where it’s come from. It’s gone through a lot before it gets to us.”

It’s hardly a surprise to hear that Morran, Thomas and their colleagues at the AWQC drink tap water.

Dr Thorsten Mosisch, a freshwater ecology expert who is SA Water’s source water quality manager, says that rather than a sense of loyalty to the product, his decision to “always drink tap water” is based on his confidence in its quality.

“I don’t see why I should fork out for bottled water when I know the tap water is basically OK,” he says.

“People don’t realise just how much monitoring we do. I think they would be surprised.”

Brainwaves

- Which sport is contested in a velodrome? equestrian events for the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games held?
- What is a swizzle stick? 26 What is entomology?
- Which Irish author, poet and playwright said “I can resist everything except temptation”? 27 What is a Midas touch?
- Fiumicino Airport serves which European city? 28 What was originally called a Pluto Platter?
- Who is the lead singer of British alternative-rock band Radiohead? 29 Which horse won the first two Melbourne Cups?
- Name the Norwegian explorer, who, in 1911, became the first person to reach the South Pole. 30 What is the capital of New Zealand?
- In which country is the headquarters of vehicle manufacturer Citroen? 31 On which ship was English navigator James Cook when he sighted the east coast of Australia in 1770?
- Chiapas is a state of which country? 32 In which year did Disneyland open?
- Water freezes at how many degrees Fahrenheit? 33 Which English county has the abbreviation Herts?
- What is the Islamic name for God? 34 Who receives the Bradman Medal each year in South Australia?
- What is an oast? 35 What is a vespiary?
- What is the women’s equivalent of the Davis Cup? 36 How many sides does an octagon have?
- Name the mythical bird of great beauty which, after burning itself on a funeral pyre, rose from its ashes to live through another cycle of years. 37 What is reputed to be the oldest continuously existing city in the world?
- Which country’s civil war lasted from 1936 to ‘39? 38 In London, what is the Old Bailey?
- Who directed the 1959 film *Some Like It Hot*? 39 Name the first athlete to run a mile in under four minutes
- What kind of creature is a miller’s thumb? 40 Who was president of Iraq from 1979 to 2003?
- What is the largest lake in England? 41 “Be attractive while you’re active” was a slogan for which brand of swimwear in the 1950s?
- What game was invented by Canadian physical education teacher James Naismith in 1891? 42 In which year did the First Fleet arrive in Sydney?
- Who recorded the 1962 hit *Speedy Gonzales*? 43 *The Rhythm of Life* is a song in which musical?
- What is the most common surname in Ireland? 44 In which European country is the port of Bremerhaven?
- In the Bible, who was the second son of Noah? 45 What does the musical direction “veloce” mean?
- Which American state is nicknamed the Aloha State? 46 What kind of food is mozzarella?
- Rodney Eade is the coach of which AFL club? 47 Who played the title character in the 1994 film *Forrest Gump*?
- In which play by William Shakespeare does the character Sir Andrew Aguecheek appear? 48 Which country won soccer’s first World Cup in 1930?
- In which country were the 49 Which African country was formerly called Upper Volta?
- 50 The Brandenburg Gate is a triumphal arch in which European city?

Answers Page 19

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