



# BOTTLED GUILT

Ten green bottles sitting on the wall... unfortunately, there are more than 10 bottles, they're not green and they're bobbing in the ocean. Is the bottled water industry a godsend to the busy and the health-aware or an environmental menace?

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In the mid-'90s, ocean researcher Charles Moore was sailing his catamaran home to California from Hawaii when he decided to take a short cut through the North Pacific Gyre, a windless vortex of currents normally avoided by seafarers. What he discovered there astounded him.

"As I gazed from the deck over the surface of what should have been a pristine ocean, I was confronted, as far as the eye could see, by the sight of plastic," Moore wrote in 2003.

He had sailed into the Eastern Garbage Patch, an oceanic anomaly estimated to cover an area roughly the size of Texas (678,051km<sup>2</sup>), and growing. "Bottles, bottle caps, wrappers, fragments... For the past 50 years, plastics that

have made their way into the Pacific Ocean have been fragmenting and accumulating as a kind of floating sewer," Moore wrote.

The ocean's plastic soup gives a whole new meaning to the phrase 'bottled water'.

Of course, when the commercial kind of bottled water first appeared on Australian supermarket shelves, about 20 years ago, it was a cause for widespread mirth. "Evian - 'naive' spelt backwards," was the popular one-liner.

Today, nobody is laughing. Bottled water is an industry worth \$544 million a year in Australia. The beverage aisle of your typical supermarket carries at least a dozen different brands of what is the same basic chemical formula - two molecules of

hydrogen and one of oxygen. We're up to our necks in water hailing from anywhere from the French Alps to the Fiji islands. Australians consume roughly 360 million litres of the stuff a year.

We clutch our bottles of spring water at the gym. We guzzle litre-and-a-half bottles to keep our skin looking good. We order it in restaurants, we expect it served to us on flights and we complain loudly when the office water cooler hasn't been replaced. The 600ml water bottle is as integral an accessory to our lives as the mobile phone.

But the backlash is here - bottled water has joined the plastic bag as a symbol of unsustainability. Last year, the Department of Environment and Climate Change informed its 4000 employees that it >



would no longer be providing them with bottled water. New York City campaigned to cut back on bottled water use, while Chicago's council introduced a five-cent tax on plastic bottles. Organisations such as Tappening in the US, Sustain in the UK and the Bottled Water Alliance in Australia have sprung up to try to convince the public to go back to tap water.

"In Australia, we have incredibly high-quality tap water," says Planet Ark founder Jon Dee, organiser of the Bottled Water Alliance (and a *sunday magazine* contributor). "And yet, more than a billion people around the world don't have access to safe drinking water. It's a sad indictment on our society that we're drinking half a billion dollars worth of bottled water every year in Australia."

The arguments against bottling water are pretty straightforward. We know that the manufacture and transport of bottles, both plastic and glass, add to greenhouse emissions and the bottles add to pollution.

The Department of Climate Change estimates that

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200ml of oil is used to produce a 1-litre disposable bottle, including transport and refrigeration. According to Tappening.com, of the 28 billion bottles of water Americans buy a year, only around 20 per cent are recycled.

Finding it hard to imbibe the recommended intake of water each day? Don't worry. According to the UK's *The Guardian*, every 1-litre plastic bottle takes an additional seven litres of water to manufacture. So, when you drink a litre of spring water, you're really consuming eight.

Bottled water also adds significantly to our grocery bills. According to Clean Up Australia, bottled water costs an average \$2.53 per litre, while it's about one cent from the tap. "A litre of bottled water is more expensive than a litre of petrol," Dee says. "It's a preposterous situation."

Yet we continue to consume it. In fact, consumption has increased by an average of 10.1 per cent over the past six years. Tony Gentile, executive director of industry association the Australian Bottled Water Institute, has no doubts why. "Let's say you're down the beach and you're thirsty. Even if you can find a tap, the water will be hot. So you're going to go to a milk bar and choose a drink out of the refrigerator. Its availability is a great boon."

Gentile cites a study in the December 2007 *Journal of Nutrition and Dietetics* that found the growing popularity of bottled water in the past seven years had coincided with a decline in the consumption of sugar-based drinks – a drop of some 300 million cans. "This tells us people are buying bottled water because they want a calorie-free beverage. If it wasn't available, the odds are they would have a soft drink."

He believes it's unfair to single out bottled water on environmental grounds. "It's nonsense, because the issue of packaging applies to all commercial beverages." The question of transportation and food kilometres riles him, too. "On that sort of argument, you wouldn't sell Australian wine in Europe, would you? Water's a commercial

product like any other – what people buy is their choice."

"If you believed industry, they'd have it that I'm telling you to drink cola," says Dee. "That's totally not what the argument is. The reason we're targeting bottled water is because you can't get cola out of a tap. You can't get beer out of a tap – as much as blokes would like to. You can get high-quality water out of a tap, and it's incredibly cheap."

Another strand to the debate is the issue of dental health. Unlike the public water supply, current regulations don't permit the addition of fluoride to bottled water in Australia; some experts are linking a decline in children's dental health with the popularity of bottled water. "Bottled water is not good for the health of your teeth compared to tap water," says Dee. "If you have concerns about the chlorine in tap water, all you have to do is filter it out."

However, the Bottled Water Institute has applied to Food Standards Australia New Zealand to be allowed to voluntarily add fluoride to its products (in the US, about 10 per cent of bottled waters contain fluoride). "It will

probably be another year before the wheels of bureaucracy go through the process," says Gentile. "It will happen."

Restaurants are arguably at the frontline of the battle over bottled water. Who hasn't dined in a fancy restaurant and felt obliged to order spring water simply not to appear cheap? *The Guardian* recently reported that Claridges Hotel in London offers more than 30 kinds of water on its 'water menu', including New Zealand's 420 Volcanic spring water, which has to make a journey of some 18,000km to get there.

In Australia, top restaurants tend not to offer elaborate water menus, as they frequently negotiate deals with individual brands to offer their water exclusively. A quick survey of some of the country's top restaurants, however, suggests that they're not forcing it on customers.

"We offer tap water as a first option," says Chris Young, maitre d of Melbourne's Jacques Reymond. "We then offer mineral water. We have no objection to tap water being drunk in the restaurant and have never done so."

Tetsuya's in Sydney, meanwhile, has its own filtration system treating every drop of water flowing into the building. You can drink the tap water without having to worry that it will taint the delicate flavours of Tetsuya Wakuda's famed degustation menu.

Some restaurants make a point of only serving local spring water. Melbourne's 100 Mile Café serves nothing that has a provenance of more than 160km away. "We use Yarra Valley Spring Water – it's very close by," says owner Paul Mathis. "My view is that water from overseas is a big no-no. We also give the option for customers to choose Melbourne tap water."

One restaurateur who has taken the plunge and banished bottled water from her menu entirely is Kylie Kwong. "We took it off in January," says Kwong. "I don't think anyone's batted an eyelid."

Her restaurant, Billy Kwong in Sydney's Surry Hills,

proudly proclaims itself the first carbon-neutral restaurant in New South Wales. "I had a meeting with my management and we all just looked at each other and said, 'Why don't we take the bottled water off and just offer the filtered water?' Because I think Sydney water is absolutely fine – and it's free. People don't come because of which water I serve."

Another enterprise that won't suffer from the bottled water backlash is Brita. The 40-year-old German company markets its household water-filtering jugs to 80 countries worldwide. Formerly relegated to health-food stores in Australia, the jugs are now sold in supermarkets countrywide. Brita's marketing manager, Mike Alborough, says the company has experienced "many years of double-digit growth – the bottled water [controversy] has helped raise awareness."

Brita's current My Green Bottle campaign gives customers a free, refillable plastic bottle when they buy a filtering jug. The company even promises to plant a tree for every customer who 'pledges' on its website to change their water-drinking habits.

Tree planting as a public relations exercise doesn't seem to have worked out so well for the bottling industry, however. At the start of the year, Mount Franklin, part of Coca-Cola Amatil (CCA), partnered with Landcare Australia to launch a scheme whereby at least one tree could be planted for every bottle of water sold. A furore erupted when Nanette Lamrock, an official from one of Landcare's umbrella organisations, spoke out against the deal, labelling it a "greenwash".

"To me, this is a blatant case of misuse by a multinational company," says Lamrock, who has since resigned. "I know how much damage [Coca-Cola] does to the environment. Large extractions of water from any reservoir area create damage. It interrupts the flow into the creeks and rivers, and it interrupts how other people use those aquifers."

"Absolute rubbish," says CCA spokesperson Sally Loane. "The total bottled water industry in Australia uses 0.01 per cent of underground water. We're not draining aquifers. We never take water if it's under threat. We spend millions on hydrogeologists so we know the sustainability of our water sources.

"We're going to plant 250,000 trees. It's not about pretending to be carbon neutral or offsetting carbon emissions. Mount Franklin has a three-year partnership with the National Breast Cancer Foundation – we've raised half a million dollars for research and nobody has accused us of 'pinkwash'."

Loane adds that Mount Franklin has saved 18,000 tonnes of plastic in the last four years through "lightweighting" their bottles and that CCA funds public place recycling stations.

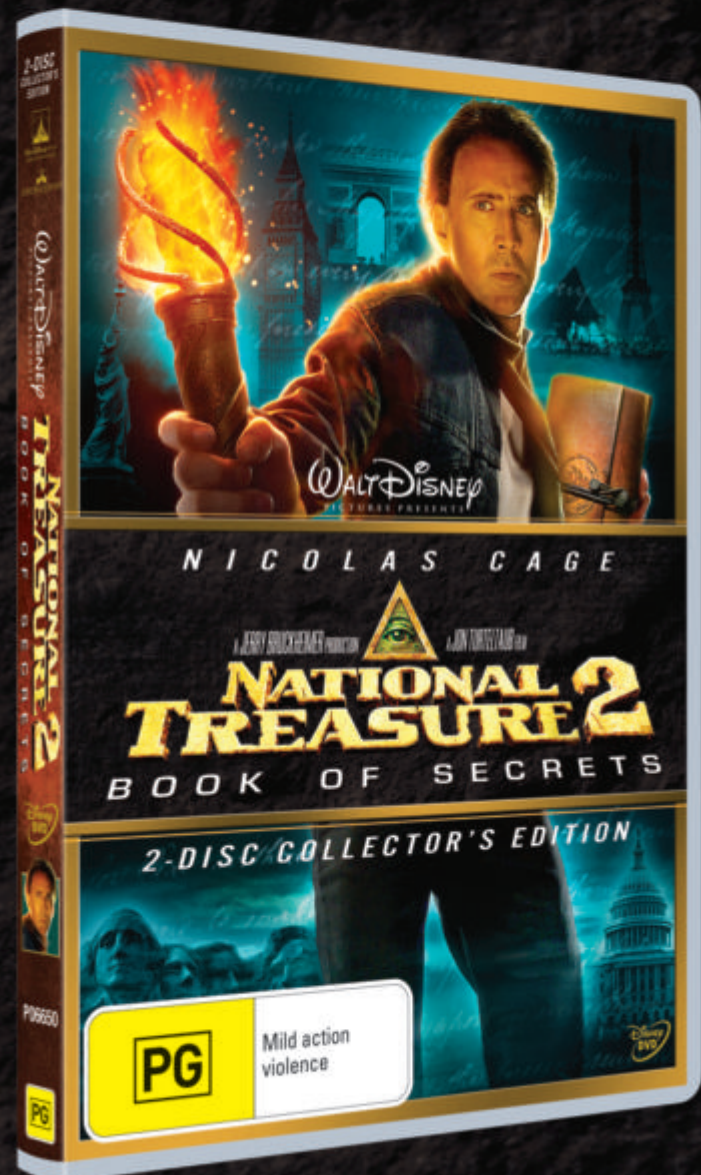
However, the bottled water lobby opposes a national deposit scheme similar to the system in South Australia, where recycling rates are more than double the national rate. In April, state and federal ministers agreed to investigate a national scheme, the results of which are to be considered in November.

Gentile argues that South Australia's deposit system is "subsidised" by the rest of the nation. "If you bring in a national deposit of 10 cents, that increases the price of the goods to the consumer, because in nine cases out of 10 the person who buys the product isn't the person who collects the refund. Yes, it would reduce litter, but at enormous cost to the consumer."

Whatever happens, the bottled water issue isn't about to go away. Late 2008 will see an event designed to bring attention to the environmental impact of water bottles, the voyage of *The Plastiki*. UK campaigner David de Rothschild plans to sail across the Pacific and through the Eastern Garbage Patch on a boat custom-made from plastic water bottles – documenting ocean trash on a raft made of trash.

It's a safe bet this will be one adventure that won't be sponsored by Evian. **SM**


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