



Water's Future or Water Futures?

BY LAURIE LAMOUNTAIN

In the past few years we considered oil to be the resource over which a third world war could be fought. However, as a result of climate change devastation, the lack of political priority, governmental failure, inequality and armed conflict, now the spotlight is on water. This, together with the eternal debate on whether water should be a luxury good or universal access to it should be guaranteed could make water the focus of major geopolitical conflicts in the 21st century.

—*Smart Water Magazine: A War Over Water*, a not so distant dystopian future by Laura F. Zarza.

We are fortunate to live in a corner of the world where water is apparently abundant. Lakes and ponds not only afford recreational and economic opportunity to this region, they geographically define it. In fact, water is so abundant here that it's easy to take it for granted. While millions of people around the globe devote a substantial portion of each day procuring water for their domestic needs, we don't think twice about washing our cars or watering our lawns. We see water as an endlessly renewable natural resource to which we humans have equal rights. But do we?

Due to an antiquated law, Maine is one of a few states that doesn't restrict land-

owners from tapping into the groundwater supply and extracting vast amounts of water. While this is great for the many industries that rely on water to produce their products, it's not so great when investment industries see it as an opportunity to make money—lots of money—by commodifying an essential natural resource.

According to a study titled *Volume of bottled water in the U.S. 2010-2019* published by Jan Conway in November of last year, "Over the last decade, yearly bottled water consumption grew by almost 40 percent, reaching a total of almost 44 gallons per person in 2019 . . . In 2018, about a fifth of consumers in the United States usually drank bottled water, while 15 percent drank water from a bottle exclusively. Only one in ten Americans drank only tap or filtered water that year."

Of course, it's more than slick designer water marketing that's responsible for these statistics. This past year has placed a spotlight on the inherent inequity that exists in our society on so many levels. A common denominator to all of them is income inequity. The poorer the zip code, the more problems with just about everything, including access to clean water. Improving water infrastructure will go a long way toward fixing that problem, but it will take much more than that to deal with the looming

prospect of water scarcity. While here in Maine we may feel secure, water quality is a serious issue in many parts of this country. For those who live in those areas, bottled water is often a necessity.

Even though replacing lead pipes and cleaning up contaminants in the environment can improve water quality for many, the problem of climate change persists. The fact is, there is simply less clean water to go around than there once was, which makes commodification of this resource an imminent threat we all need to acknowledge and react to, including those of us who are currently feeling fortunate.

In December of 2020, *Bloomberg News* reported that "Water joined gold, oil and other commodities traded on Wall Street, highlighting worries that the life-sustaining natural resource may become scarce across more of the world."

The report cited the United Nations warning of human-driven climate change "making water availability increasingly less predictable. In California, the most recent acute dry spell stretched from December 2011 until March of [2019], according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. The most dire effects took hold in July 2014, with 58% of the state's land suffering 'exceptional drought,' leading to crop and pasture losses and other water emergencies."

So it's not surprising that water has made its way to Wall Street. Facing uncertain prospects, farmers and municipalities have been compelled to factor water into their budgets, and the market allows them to hedge bets on the future price of it as a means of managing supply risk. But as another article published in December 2020 by the Yale School of the Environment points out, "some experts say treating water as a tradable commodity puts a basic human right into the hands of financial institutions and investors, a dangerous arrangement as climate change alters precipitation patterns and increases water scarcity."

The questions of whether or not water is a basic human right gets muddy when it comes to privatization. When water is privatized, does it rather become a human need that is subject to corporate control and regulation, thereby intercepting our relation with it? Commodification poses a parallel threat: turning water into a product that reaps the "owners" hefty profits at public expense. An important point to ponder is that it is consumption, rather than conservation, that generates profit.

In California, where Nestlé Waters North America (NWN) has been pumping millions of gallons of water out of the San Bernardino forest and bottling it under the Arrowhead brand, drought conditions have continued to worsen. The governor declared a regional drought emergency after another dry winter left major reservoirs at half capacity or lower, and yet Nestlé has continued pumping, at no cost to them beyond an annual permit fee of \$2,100 to the Forest Service. Conservationists have long accused NWN of pumping much more than it claims, and on April 23, 2021, state water officials finally issued a cease-and-desist order to be put before the California Water Resources Control Board. It remains to be seen how things will play out for Californians, given that conservationists have also long accused NWN of leveraging lobbying power to influence state and local officials.

Here in Maine, in late April of 2021, forecasters are already warning of another summer of drought. It's a trend that has been dogging us for six years now. In 2016, wells were running dry and people were waking up to the fact that water is a very big deal. In Denmark, Maine, where Nestlé Waters North America (formerly branded as Poland Spring) has been conducting large-scale groundwater extraction since 2010, residents were anxious to know how close they were to reaching Alert and Action levels through daily pumping. They were also questioning why, in 2012, NWN had requested and been granted permission from the selectboard to lower Alert and Action levels, reduce the number of monitoring points, and change the index they'd been using to measure drought conditions.

According to the permit NWN has with Denmark that allows them "an aggregate daily total not to exceed 432,000 gallons in any given day, or an aggregate annual total not to exceed 105,100,000 gallons in any given 365-day period," they are required to submit monthly reports documenting their extraction to the town, and although they engage a "third-party" company to take water levels at most of the monitoring wells and a handful of nearby domestic wells, it feels to many residents a bit like the fox guarding the hen house.

And while Denmark conscientiously crafted their large-scale water ordinance to avoid the toll that tank trucks would take on its rural roads, it's worth noting that the daily aggregate amount drawn from Denmark through an underground pipeline to a

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filling station in nearby Fryeburg translates to 50 tank trucks transporting tons of water over Maine roads each day. It's also worth noting that Cold Spring in Denmark is just one of ten locations from which NWN extracts water in Maine.

This spring, Switzerland-based Nestlé S.A. sold its Poland Spring brand, along with several other regional water brands in the U.S. and Canada, to a pair of private equity firms that hope to reinvigorate sales. One Rock Capital Partners and Metropoulos and Co. bought the brands for \$4.3 billion, making it one of the largest bottled beverage companies in the U.S. The company known as Nestlé Waters North America will operate under a new corporate name, BlueTriton. The new company is already facing challenges in Ontario, Canada, where there is an effort to strengthen municipal protection of water resources.

While bottled water is a different animal than bulk water, it's still water. That it accounts for the lion's share of one million plastic bottles purchased every minute around the globe lends an environmental absurdity that cannot be ignored. According to the Container Recycling Institute, a mere 14 percent of plastic water bottles used in the U.S. are recycled. Not only does a staggering 86 percent end up in the ocean, littering the land or in landfills, they disburse micro plastics into the consumer before being discarded. Our former governor scoffed at the idea of BPA, a controversial chemical additive in plastic, being a health threat, saying "the worse case is some women may have little beards."

Bottled water is also dead water. If you've ever cracked open a bottle of water and taken a big swig of something that tastes more like stale plastic, you know what I mean. The water that flows from my kitchen tap tastes pure and alive because it hasn't been trapped in plastic. Ironically, it comes from the same source that Poland Spring, now BlueTriton, is extracting water from to fill millions of plastic containers. While I can't claim my water is spring water, it's worth noting that Poland Spring advertised its product as "100% Natural Spring

Water," a claim challenged in an ongoing class action lawsuit that alleges "not one drop of Poland Spring Water emanates from a water source that complies with the Food and Drug Administration definition of spring water." The suit further contends that the original spring in Poland, Maine, from which the brand takes its name, ran dry nearly fifty years ago.

It can't be denied that when natural disaster affects access to fresh water, bottled water can spell the difference between life and death. In places like Flint, Michigan, Georgia and Texas, people still dealing with lead contamination and boil water advisories buy bottled water out of necessity, rather than convenience. But we shouldn't kid ourselves. Until we can give up our irresponsible use of chemicals and contaminants, we *all* face the threat of water scarcity.

In February of this year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued a press release stating that it had "issued two actions to protect public health by addressing per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in drinking water, highlighting the agency's commitment to address these long-lasting 'forever chemicals' that can enter drinking water supplies and impact communities across the United States." Less than a month later, residents of Fairfield, Maine, filed a class action lawsuit in which they allege that a local mill contaminated their land with PFAS, thereby devaluing their properties, exposing them to health risks, and necessitating soil remediation.

The fact that the current administration is committed to addressing PFAS in our nation's drinking water by enjoining the EPA to protect public health and the environment is hopeful. But we can't just leave it up to government. We all bear a responsibility. There are things we can all do to protect our most precious resource—and they don't necessarily have to be big. For one, we can ask ourselves, why on Earth pay the price that comes from consuming water in little plastic bottles? And we can honor the fact that we have the good fortune to live in a corner of the world where clean water is still a given by protecting it. It's fate is in our hands. 🌱