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[Thirst for bottled water is pouring resources down drain](#)

ALF YOUNG ON TUESDAY

EVEN with the recent rise in crude oil prices, it can still cost more to buy bottled water in the United States than to pump the same volume of gasoline into your car's tank.

At the inflated prices charged for bottled water in restaurants in Britain, the same conclusion is readily drawn from drinking bottled water while dining out here.

But such perverse economic logic is not stopping Americans, or the rest of us, drinking more and more expensive water from the bottle, rather than the much cheaper version available from any tap. We may rail against higher petrol prices, but we seem intent on drinking bottled water at almost any price.

US consumption of bottled water hit 25.8 billion litres in 2004, a rise of 49percent on demand five years earlier. The United States still dominates global consumption, estimated at some 154 billion litres in 2004. However the thirst for bottled water is rising even faster globally, up by 57percent since 1999.

This is not just a lifestyle or designer phenomenon. The next three countries behind the US in the global top 10 are Mexico, China and Brazil. And while four European states - Italy, Germany, France and Spain - are also among the world's biggest bottled water consumers, the eighth and 10th spots go to Indonesia and India respectively.

All, developed and developing countries alike, are showing strong consumption growth year-on-year. So is the UK, as the most casual observation in supermarkets, convenience stores, filling stations, let alone restaurants here quickly demonstrates. But



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we are still well off the global pace in this particular race to drink water in the most expensive form possible.

In per-capita terms, Italy leads the field. The average Italian was drinking nearly 184 litres of bottled water in 2004. The average Briton managed just 33 litres.

The top 15 in the per-capita consumption league includes 10 European Union states (including the Czech Republic), the US and Mexico, and three middle eastern countries, the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, one Finnish company shipped 1.4 million bottles of local tap water to Saudi Arabia from its Helsinki bottling plant in 2004. And one of the most fashionable brands on sale in the US comes all the way from Fiji. We think nothing of drinking water that originates in Italy or France.

But to reach us in bottled form, this global trade in water is imposing significant pressure on the earth's resources. As a new report from the Washington-based Earth Policy Institute puts it, it is tantamount to "pouring resources down the drain".

The report, by Emily Arnold, argues that, in the industrialised world, "bottled water is often no healthier than tap water" despite the fact that it can cost up to 10,000 times more. But to package and distribute it - nearly a quarter of all those 154 billion litres cross a national border before being drunk, apparently - consumes vast quantities of energy and generates a lot of unnecessary waste.

Most containers are made from the form of plastic known as PET, polyethylene terephthalate, patented way back in 1941 and favoured for its barrier qualities when faced with oxygen or carbon dioxide. PET is processed from crude oil.

According to Arnold, making enough bottles to satisfy US demand each year could, in effect, keep another 100,000 cars on American roads over the same period.

The big disposal problem with PET is that burning it generates chlorine and heavy metals, while putting it to landfill means leaving it for 1000 years or more to biodegrade.

Recycling increasingly means using even more energy to ship large quantities of this particular plastic back to countries like China and India for processing.

But that, argues Emily Arnold, is not the only strain this growing trade puts on our environment. Extraction of water for bottling is causing local water shortages from India all the way to the Great Lakes and Texas.

Progressive climate change is arguably beginning to disrupt normal water supplies in more and more parts of the world. After a very dry January, water utilities in many parts of the UK are reporting below-average reserves in their reservoirs and warning of restrictions to come this summer if it does not rain soon.

But what of the rising consumption of bottled water in poorer parts of the globe. Mexico stands second in that global league table, remember, and Indonesia and India are both in the top 10. Isn't that not providing clean water to people who might not otherwise have any access to it?

Arnold claims bottled water isn't even going to solve the problems of around 1.1 billion people living today who have no access to a secure, clean water supply. She points out that the UN millennium development goal for environmental sustainability calls for a halving of the proportion of people lacking access to safe drinking water by 2015.

The price tag is a doubling of the [dollars]15bn ([GBP]8.5bn) a year the world currently spends on water supply and sanitation. "While this amount may seem large, " she writes, "it pales in comparison to the estimated [dollars]100bn spent each year on bottled water."

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