

Opinion & Analysis

Time to pull the plug on the bottled water swindle



JOHN GIBBONS

The plastic bag levy must be extended to the containers holding the 130 million litres of water we drink annually

HERE'S A variation on the "waiter, there's a fly in my soup" gag. The question is how would you persuade people to knowingly drink water from a bottle that contained a dead spider? Penn & Teller's satirical US documentary series decided to find out by taking over a posh restaurant and producing a phoney "water menu" of expensive and exotic-sounding bottles – all of which had been filled from the tap using an old garden hose.

One choice was enticingly labelled *L'eau Du Robinet* (French for "tap water"), while the evening's speciality, complete with an enormous dead arachnid, was labelled *Amazon*. The spider, they were told, was fresh from the rainforest, and added to its "medicinal qualities". The upmarket diners not only tried it, they were willing to shell out \$7 a bottle for this tainted tap water. With a little marketing to wash it down, some of us will literally swallow anything.

Irish people, on the other hand, would never be that gullible, right? Since last year, Superquinn has stocked Fiji Water, "the brand selected by many A-list movie stars and celebrities", according to the blurb from its distributors. Rather than insect parts, its secret ingredient is silica, "which is what gives Fiji Water its soft-mouth feel". Silica is more

commonly known as sand.

Last year, BBC television's *Panorama* current affairs programme investigated the high environmental cost of our strange love affair with bottled water. Fiji Water is indeed sourced in Fiji, then shipped more than 10,000 miles to Europe and beyond.

Meanwhile, one in three Fijians doesn't have access to safe drinking water, and illnesses and deaths from typhus and other waterborne diseases are common on the island. The extraction of huge amounts of water for export is draining the island's aquifers, putting even more pressure on supplies for the islanders.

Globally, as we ship billions of bottles of water from exotic-sounding locales to assuage our new-found thirst for water as a lifestyle accessory, 3,000 children die each day as a direct result of drinking contaminated water.

Globally, bottled water requires the production of about 300 billion plastic bottles a year, of which maybe one in five is recycled. Transportation, packaging, distribution and dealing with the waste generates tens of millions of tonnes of carbon emissions – and for what exactly? About 40 per cent of all bottled water sold is simply municipal tap water put into plastic bottles by corporations such as Pepsi (Aquafina) and Coca-Cola (Dasani)

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and then sold back to the public in plastic containers.

This is a peculiar form of double taxation for consumers. First, they pay to have a safe, high-quality public water supply, then they pay again to drink the very water they have already paid to purify. The difference is that, even with water charges, it's up to 10,000 times more expensive to drink bottled versus tap water.

There are small but encouraging signs of a gradual outbreak of common sense. In the Australian town of Bundanoon, its population

of 2,500 voted overwhelmingly this summer to ban the sale of bottled water. Locals were furious when a bottled water company tried to tap their local aquifer and sell off the water.

Their stance received support from the premier of New South Wales, who ordered government departments to stop buying bottled water.

Across the US, cities from Chicago to Los Angeles have made it illegal to spend municipal money on bottled water.

London mayor Boris Johnson points to the absurdity of some bottled waters costing more per litre than petrol. The city is now trialling public faucets to provide chilled tap water at 20p a fill – just bring your reusable container.

"It's killing our planet, and for no good reason," says Eric Olsen of the Natural Resources Defence Council.

Test after test has proven it doesn't taste better than tap water. In fact, unpleasant chemicals actually leach from these plastic containers.

Plastic is one of the world's most chronic pollutants. A colossal floating mass of waste trapped in the north Pacific gyre between Hawaii and Japan is estimated to contain more than 100 million tonnes of a floating soup of plastic, some of it there since the

1950s. The contaminated area of ocean is larger than the continental United States.

Nor is this problem specific to the Pacific. The UN Environment Programme calculates that every square mile of the world's oceans contains an average of 46,000 pieces of floating plastic. More than one million sea birds a year die from ingesting plastic. This toxic cocktail makes its journey full circle to humanity via contamination of the marine produce we in turn eat.

Ireland's plastic bag tax in 2002 effected a sea change in public behaviour, leading to drastic reductions in usage and waste, but this effect is starting to wear off. Legislation passes through the Dáil this month to double this levy – which has raised €120 million so far – to 44 cent a bag.

Given our generally excellent unmetered public water supply, there is a compelling argument to extend this levy to the containers that hold the 130 million litres of bottled water that we consume annually, as well as to the new scourge of packing fresh milk in indestructible plastic containers.

And the next time you're offered "still or sparkling" in a restaurant, try ordering *L'eau Du Robinet* instead.

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