

When it comes to bottled water, conspicuous consumption used to be a sign of status. To clasp a bottle of FIJI meant projecting ourselves as at the top of the food chain. Our craving for status was—still is—exploited by the advertisement campaigns of companies that sell bottled water, not the least by the allure of labels projecting snowy mountain peaks.

Today we know that 25 to 30 percent of bottled water comes straight from municipal tap water systems. “Some of that water goes through additional filtering, but some of it does not,” says an article on the subject in *Earth Talk*. To make matters worse, the manufacture of all those bottles to meet American demand requires more than 1.5 million barrels of oil annually, enough to fuel some 100,000 US cars for an entire year. Once the water is consumed, much of the plastic ends up as garbage. According to the Container Recycling Institute, of all the plastic water bottles in the United States, an astounding 86 percent is tossed into the trash.

One person who is intimately acquainted with the mounds of wasteful garbage generated here in Cheyenne is Dennis Pino, the director of solid-waste management. Since our landfills are in deplorable shape, every weekday 150 tons of material is trucked from Cheyenne to a disposal site in Ault, Colorado: that’s 12 semi-trailer loads per day. The price tag? Each truckload full of trash costs us more than \$380: fuel expenses, drivers’ salaries, fleet maintenance, and tipping fees make up the tally. Meanwhile, one load only of recycled material leaves Cheyenne for Denver per day. Pino wishes to introduce more comprehensive recycling programs, but the funding is meager and higher priorities exist, for example, the urgent need to clean up existing landfills that leak trace minerals like mercury into Wyoming’s groundwater. He often gives talks to civic groups and schools on the need to refrain from dumping batteries or CFLs into the garbage: these items must be disposed of as “hazardous waste.” He is forever beating the drum for the recycling that each of us can undertake if we but pay attention and take the time to put recyclables into their proper containers.

“We’ve made progress at Frontier Days,” says Pino. “In 2011, the special containers at the grounds made a big difference. We recycled 30 tons of cardboard and five tons of plastics and aluminum.” The air force base sent personnel that patrolled the grounds and helped with the clean-up, he says.

As for that bottle of water held in your fist: Charles Fishman documents that tap water in the US is one of the safest resources around, undergoing rigorous testing and safeguarding, while bottled water “isn’t regulated with anything like the scrutiny and care that tap water is. The chance that there’s something kinky about your drink of water is actually greater with a commercially packaged bottle of water than with a glass of tap water,” he writes in *The Big Thirst*. Fishman further documents that FIJI water comes from an aquifer on the north coast of Fiji’s main island where in a “state-of-the-art factory” it finds its way into “more than a million bottles of water a day.” The bottles then make it “by truck, cargo container, ship, and even the Panama Canal, to the hippest clubs in Los Angeles (5,520 miles from Fiji) and Miami Beach (7,480 miles from Fiji). Meanwhile, more than half the residents of the nation of Fiji do not themselves have safe, reliable drinking water.”

As far as taste is concerned, in test after test, most people cannot tell the difference between bottled water and tap water. “When *Good Morning America* conducted a blind taste test with its

studio audience, New York City tap water was chosen as the heavy favorite over Poland Spring, Evian, and the oxygenated water Life O2,” states the *Earth Talk* article.

We in Wyoming are privileged in that our municipal water comes from the reservoirs that catch snowmelt; hence, our tap brings us the sort of pristine drink suggested by the snowy-mountain labels. It’s true that well water carries sediments, and if your water comes from a well, you may wish to run it through a simple counter-top filtering pitcher. Another choice is to purchase one of the sturdy blue gallon jugs from the food store and fill it up with the water from the dispenser at the store; the price per gallon is usually less than fifty cents. A reverse osmosis system, on the other hand, is a wasteful way to obtain sediment-free water: three to five gallons of water must be processed to produce one gallon filtered, and the replacement filters are quite expensive.