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The real cost of bottled water

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AUSTRALIA'S love affair with bottled water is costing the planet 314,000 barrels of oil a year.

That's how much of one of the world's most precious resources it takes to package, ship and refrigerate a product that is already piped to every single suburban premises for next to nothing, according to *Sunday Age* calculations.

"It's one of the greatest cons ever pulled," says Clean Up Australia chairman Ian Kiernan. "It's just lunacy, there is no other word for it. We are squandering our oil resources."

Oil is not the only precious resource being squandered by consumers, with bottled water 2500 times more expensive than the tap variety.

"Drinking water in Melbourne or Sydney costs around \$1.20 a tonne," says Mr Kiernan. "Australian bottled water costs around \$3000 a tonne. And Italian bottled water? About \$9000 a tonne.

"It's more expensive than petrol — if you could turn petrol into water you could make money."

According to the Australasian Bottled Water Institute, we spend about \$385 million a year on bottled water.

Peter Gleick, president of the California-based Pacific Institute, which provides independent research and policy analysis on issues of development and the environment, recently calculated that demand for bottled water in the United States was burning up at least 17 million barrels of oil a year.

"And that's just the energy required to make the plastic resin and make it into bottles. It doesn't include the energy needed to get the bottled water to your local store," Dr Gleick says.

He estimates that the total amount of energy required for every bottle of water is equivalent, on average, to filling a quarter of a plastic bottle with crude oil.

"There are some situations where it might be OK to buy a bottle of water, but I don't think consumers are fully aware of the economic and environmental impact of what it takes to produce a bottle of water," he says.

"Especially when pure, clean drinking water is available, literally, on tap."

With no chlorine added to kill bacteria and no fluoride to strengthen teeth, bottled water can't even be considered better for you.

Federal Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull is urging consumers to think more carefully about their purchases.

"We must be thoughtful all of the time," Mr Turnbull says. "And we must encourage people to think about the way they use all our resources."

Mr Turnbull says the waste of resources used to get bottled water to the shop also highlights the

need for a carbon price.

"I think what this underlines is the importance of the price for carbon being built into our daily lives, and hence the importance of the emissions trading scheme," he says.

"There is carbon in everything — even in the energy used to pump the drinking water around our pipes — and the best way of trying to unpick all of that is by having an advanced emissions trading scheme that puts a price on the carbon and automatically encourages people to find ways to use less."

With only 35 per cent of water bottles being recycled, and 55 per cent going to landfill, Australian Conservation Foundation spokeswoman Sophie Scott says the bottled water craze also poses an enormous waste hazard.

"We are talking thousands of tonnes of rubbish a year. There are many ways in which we waste resources in our daily lives, but this has to be one of the easiest to cut down on. Next time you're thirsty, pour yourself a glass from the tap."

Sally Loane, spokeswoman for Coca-Cola Amatil, Australia's largest producer of bottled water, said the company was making every effort to reduce the impact of plastic bottles on the environment.

Ms Loane defended the company's right to sell and market a product that is in high demand.

"There is a market for it. Consumers like the convenience of bottled water. A lot of people believe it tastes better. It's nice and cold. That's what consumers want, and that's what we're giving them."

Mixing oil and water

■ Australians spent \$385 million on 250 million litres of bottled water in 2006.

■ It takes 3.4 megajoules of energy to make a typical one-litre plastic bottle — or 850 million megajoules to bottle 250 million litres of water.

■ A barrel of oil has 6000 megajoules, so it takes 141,666 barrels of oil to make the PET plastic.

■ The energy required to bring bottled water to market — converting the PET plastic into bottles, bottling the water, transporting and refrigerating the bottled water — means the amount of oil required equals 20 per cent of the bottle's volume.

■ For 250 million litres of water, that equals 50 million litres of oil — 314,465 barrels of oil.

■ In addition to the water in bottles, twice as much water is used in the production process. Every litre sold represents three litres of water.

SOURCE: THE AUSTRALASIAN BOTTLED WATER INSTITUTE INC.

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