



# Want to go green? Ditch bottled water



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The latest essential accessory is another environmental scourge.

Did someone say fuel crisis? A naturally occurring substance until recently seen as a basic human right has been recalibrated as a luxury item. Ordinary people in slave to the good oil are forking out fistfuls of cash for their fix, while wilfully or guiltily ignoring the spectre of environmental catastrophe. Governments hover nervously on the brink of action while the Western world gets lost navigating the terminus of its collective navel.

Quelle disaster. As one US-based scribe put it: "The bottled water industry is a testament to H. L. Mencken's belief that no one ever lost money underestimating the intelligence of the American people." The Venetians also know a thing or two about water. They're surrounded by the stuff. More to the point, they're surrounded by the detritus of the tourism industry in which ugly Americans (and Austrians, and, no doubt, a fair share of Austra-

lians) throw around their used PET water containers like they're some sort of biodegradable confetti. This unauthorised municipal decoration has prompted the burghers to give each visitor an empty, refillable water bottle and a map of the city's 122 water fountains.

It's a brilliant idea from the country that boasts the highest per capita consumption of bottled water (183.6 litres per person, per year). Australians consume a comparably measly 12 litres each, but that figure is growing faster than Buddy Franklin's goal-kicking tally. Water — boring, plain old water — is the nation's fastest growing beverage, with sales increasing by an average of 10.1% every year for the past six years. While we've seemingly embraced the edict to not be a Wally with water when it comes to showering or gardening, our embrace of the bottled stuff is screaming out for a new campaign: Don't be a wanker with water.

Let's not fool ourselves. It's going to be tough going cold turkey. Water, that quotidian little prerequisite for life, has already been accorded top shelf status. The happy threesome of two hydrogens and a single

oxygen atom has gripped the imagination of a sheep-like public willing to believe something is innately more valuable if it comes with a hefty price-tag attached. To wit: "insert name of fancy French brand water here", at about \$5 for a litre, is nearly three times dearer than petrol, and it doesn't get you as far. Nor does bottled water have any health benefits over the tap stuff. It just looks prettier in its fancy packaging and it sometimes comes with a really cool chemical analysis on the label that might mean something to someone who has graduated from first-year chemistry.

Australia remains, for the moment at least, free from the more notable excesses of the bottled water industry. The water sommelier is a new breed of professional to be found in some of the better restaurants in London and New York, where they advise diners on the perfect water-matching for each course. Perhaps sir would like to try a thawed iceberg that broke off the coast of Greenland with his foie gras? Or the Cloud Juice sourced from King Island rain, which gives an elegant velvet mouthfeel when served at room



temperature? But whereas once upon a time a wall of water meant a visit to the National Gallery on St Kilda Road, now all you have to do is head to the nearest supermarket.

Water is the new Frankenstein's monster: take your pick from sparkling, still, imported, domestic, flavoured, vitamin-added, fat-free, extra-hydrating and organic — the latter, apparently, a complete furphy. Just ask the nearest first-year chemistry student.

There is, admittedly, something apposite about water being given the status it deserves. It shouldn't be seen as something that dribbles meaninglessly from the tap. A Goldman Sachs report released last week warned that water was becoming so valuable it was "the petroleum for the next century". So when an estimated 20% of the world's population hasn't access to clean drinking water there's something obscene about its elevation to

another paragon of conspicuous consumption.

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Business analysts IBISWorld call it "profit in a bottle". They predicted two months ago that the bottled water trade in Australia would grow this financial year by 9.1% to \$460.6 million on the back of rising health consciousness, strong disposable income, and "warm weather". The latter is presumably a softly-softly recognition of global warming, which is hugely appropriate considering it can take up to seven litres of water and a litre of crude oil to produce one litre of bottled water.

A global backlash is brewing. US cities such as San Francisco, New York and Seattle are trotting out campaigns in favour of the stuff that comes from the tap.

Melbourne, meanwhile, has great tap water, but it looks like we mightn't have enough of it for future supplies. The State Government has vetoed the idea, but if we're happy to scoff added vitamins and flavours and colours from expensive bottles of water from dubious aquifers in Pacific Island nations, shouldn't we also cope with the concept of adding recycled sewage to the city's drinking supplies?

That's an argument that's going to heat up along with the planet. For now, it's time to do penance for our sins, whether they're ecologically or gullibility based. Hold strong and reject those water wanker concepts such as "terroir" and "mouthfeel". They're probably best not applied to a glass of recycled sewage, anyway. But that's precisely the point. It's water. Just drink it.

Larissa Dubecki is an Age columnist.