



Bottled water fad springs a leak

Julian Lee

WHEN fashion comes with a hefty price tag, buying a bottle of water for a few bucks seems like a breeze.

It's a cheap way to gain cachet because brand names such as Fiji Water and Perrier have become as synonymous with couture as Christian Dior and Chanel - at a fraction of the cost. To be seen around town clutching a bottle of San Pellegrino speaks volumes about you. It says you are a sophisticated, fashion-conscious urbanite and regularly worship at the altar of well being.

But if the hardening of attitudes towards bottled water in some countries is an indication, social ostracism could be the ultimate price to pay for ostentatious consumption of bottled water.

In America bottled water is rapidly becoming the new social evil. The very people who made water as vital an accessory as a mobile phone are now questioning the ethical and en-

vironmental cost of drinking water by the bottle.

Influential online magazine Slate recently reported that "thanks to the faddish explosion of the green movement, bottled water has become the latest - and purest - symbol of crass consumption".

The mayors of Seattle and San Francisco have banned the use of bottled water at city-funded meetings and functions. Sales of reusable bottles are rising rapidly and the Blogosphere is awash with such unambiguous blog titles as "Bottled Water is a Rip Off".

Meanwhile, in Britain, *The Guardian* newspaper's online edition, Guardian Unlimited, is urging members of its "Tread lightly" community to give up bottled water.

However, it appears this is the latest trend not to reach these shores - yet.

No, instead Australians appear to be addicted to the stuff, despite having some of the best and cheapest tap water in the world.

We even bottle our own water and

sell it abroad. Australia's King Island Cloud Juice brags about its origins, saying "You are drinking some of the cleanest water nature has to offer."

Tony Gentile, the chief executive of the Australian Beverages Council, says he can't detect a consumer backlash. "If sales are any evidence, well, there is none," he says.

Any backlash, such as it is, is so far confined to councils. Many Councils has banned bottled water at its meetings and Blacktown plans to campaign on the use of reusable bottles.

Elsewhere, our obsession with water and its fashionableness continues.

Market researchers IBSWorld expect the industry to grow by 9.1 per cent to \$460.6 million this financial year. And sales of Coca Cola Amatil's latest line of waters, which come in 10 different flavours with vitamins and minerals in funky bottles, are rising rapidly.

"It's a free society and people can choose what they want to drink," Gentile says. "And they are choosing to drink water."