

IDEAS & TRENDS

A Battle Between the Bottle and the Faucet

By BILL MARSH

THOSE eight daily glasses of water you're supposed to drink for good health? They will cost you \$0.00135 — about 49 cents a year — if you take it from a New York City tap.

Or, city officials suggest, you could spend 2,900 times as much, roughly \$1,400 yearly, by drinking bottled water. For the extra money, they say, you get the added responsibility for piling on to the nation's waste heap and encouraging more of the industrial emissions that are heating up the planet.

But trends in American thirst quenching favor the 2,900-fold premium, as the overflowing trash cans of Central Park attest. In fact, bottled water is growing at the expense of every other beverage category except sports drinks. It has overtaken coffee and milk, and it is closing in on beer. Tap, if trends continue, would be next.

Now New York City officials — like the mayors of Minneapolis, Salt Lake City and San Francisco — are campaigning to get people to reverse course and open their faucets instead of their wallets. The city Health Department, mindful of high obesity rates, says water is more healthful than many other, sugar-filled drinks. The city's Department of Environmental Protection touts its low environmental impact. Both note that it's practically free (leaving aside those New Yorkers for whom paying extra is a lifestyle choice).

New York's water is the envy of municipalities everywhere. It is one of just five major American systems whose water is so good it needs little or no filtration, saving energy and chemicals. (The others are Boston, Portland, Ore., San Francisco and Seattle.)

The system is self-sustaining from rainwater stored in reservoirs. Gravity takes it downhill to the city, where pumps are unnecessary in all but a few neighborhoods.

New York water is quite pure, requiring little chlorine, and low in minerals, giving it a clean taste.

Sounds like an ad for bottled water.

But beverage industry representatives say their version is not just about health and taste — its plastic container, scorned by environmentalists, is actually a plus for consumers.

"The tap water quality is fine in most of the United States," said John D. Sicher Jr., editor and publisher at Beverage Digest, a trade publication. "The issue is convenience and shifting consumer preference. It's not so easy, walking down Third Avenue on a hot day, to get a glass of tap water."

Bottled water has profited from the sagging image of soft drinks, a category in decline for nearly a decade (but still the most consumed of beverages, by far). Preferences evolve — could it be tap's turn?

"Through education and motivation you can get people to change their habits," said Emily Lloyd, commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection, citing smoking, recycling and wearing seat belts. Convenience comes in different forms, she added: "It's easy to fill a bottle of water and stick it in your backpack."

With surveys showing climate change a growing concern, officials and advocates say they hope people will consider the implications of billions of bottles.

"More than 90 percent of the environmental impacts from a plastic bottle happen before the consumer opens it," said Dr. Allen Hershkowitz, a senior scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council. Oil for plastic, oil for shipping, oil for refrigeration — and in the end, most of the effort goes to landfills.

"The bottle is going to have to change," he said, noting research in plastics made from plants. "I'm seeing more interest in this than any time in 30 years."

Cool
Healthy
Zero calories
Zero sugar
Clean
Great on the go

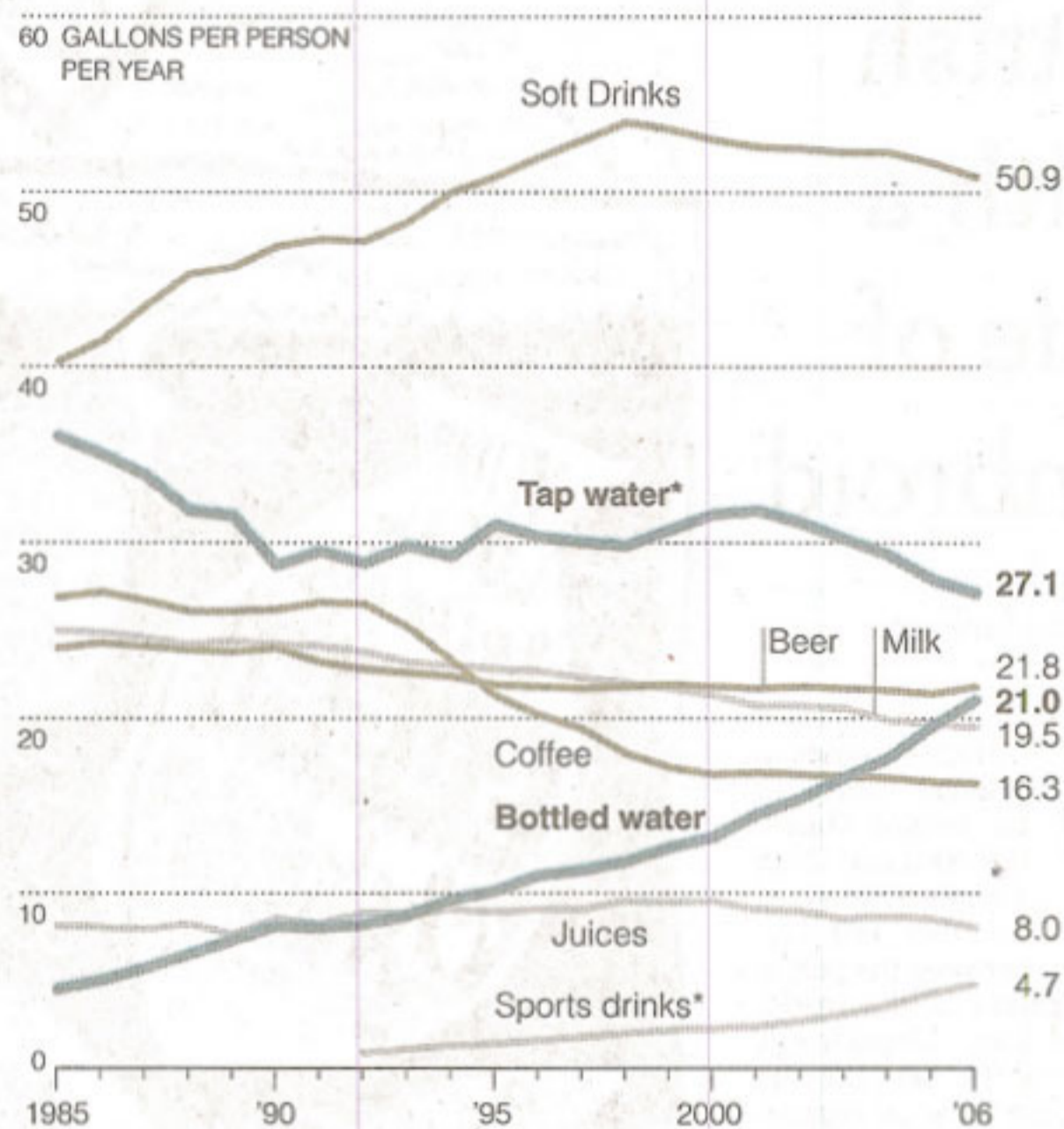
NYC Water
Get Your Fill

New York ads offer tap water as an appealing choice over commercial beverages.

Sources: Beverage Digest; Natural Resources Defense Council; Container Recycling Institute

Satisfying the National Thirst ...

Beverage Digest, which tracks trends in the industry, reports that the amount of liquid consumed by the average American holds steady at an estimated 182.5 gallons per year. Bottled water's share is growing, while almost everything else is in decline.



*Tap water figures include small quantities of other beverages; they included sports drinks until 1992.

... With Lots of Bottles

This is what an average American's consumption of bottled water looked like last year. When you total up these bottles (one of many possible combinations) it makes 21 gallons, or 79.5 liters.

1 LITER BOTTLES



700 ML BOTTLES



HALF-LITER BOTTLES



About one gallon of bottled water per American is imported — 300 million gallons total last year.

ESTIMATING THE CARBON COST

According to an analysis by the Natural Resources Defense Council, the 43 million gallons of bottled water imported from the European Union into New York area ports last year traveled 3,500 miles and created 3,800 tons of carbon dioxide — equivalent to 660 cars running for a year.

About one million gallons came from Fiji, a distance of 8,000 miles, creating an additional 190 tons of CO₂ (another 30 cars running).



The New York Times; photographs by Tony Cenicola/The New York Times