



Bottled Water: The Wrong Enemy

Sorry, Concord. Banning sales is the last thing we should be doing.

By TOM KEANE

To many, bottled water is a modern evil, a wasteful and environmentally destructive consumer scam. I say it's a brilliant triumph for public health.

In this, I part company with the good folks of Concord, that shot-heard-round-the-world town now seemingly determined to seize the mantle of looniness from Cambridge.

Someday soon, if the town has its way, a thirsty bicyclist will pull up outside the Cumberland Farms on Thoreau Street, walk inside looking for a bottle of water, and find none. That's because Concord wants to make bottled water illegal. (The attorney general this summer rejected a ban Concord passed in April, but supporters vow they'll try again.) No doubt there will be plenty of sodas, sports drinks, and teas to choose from, but of water—just water—there will be none. And so our biker, still seeking hydration of some sort, will be stuck with something flavored and often sweet.

A few weeks ago, my daughter and a group of friends gathered to bid goodbye to summer. We were to provide drinks. "Cola? Root beer?" I asked my daughter.

"Water would be fine."

That can't be right, I thought. "Orange soda?" I proposed. "Iced tea or Gatorade?"

"Just water," she said. "We like water." Maybe it's a generational thing, but many kids and young adults these days seem to prefer bottled water. Well, we're going to show them. We're going to ban it.

From one angle, I can understand the combination of disbelief and outrage that has greeted the bottled-water phenomenon. How dare a company take something that is essentially free, pour it into a plastic bottle, and try to sell it for the same price as a Coke? And what kind of fools would then actually believe this swindle and pay good money for it?

But from a different viewpoint, how is it

Pure, clean water is evil, but add carbonation and lots of sugar and it's OK?

that pure, clean, noncaloric water should be banned, but if you take the same stuff, carbonate it, and then add lots of sugar, artificial coloring, and some flavor, it's OK? The residents of Concord aren't rising up against any other beverage except water (even though water containers, usually lighter than the stronger containers needed for carbonated beverages, consume less plastic and are cheaper to ship).

"Fat America" is the public health crisis of the moment, and for good reason. Almost 27 percent of Americans are obese, an all-time high. And directly connected to that is the soaring incidence of diabetes. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of new cases tripled from 1980 to 2008, from less than 500,000 to more than 1.6 million, resulting in enormous economic costs, higher mortality rates, and greatly reduced quality of life. And a principal cause of all this, according to many recent studies, is our unrelenting consumption of sugared beverages.

I realize that Poland Spring and Evian aren't in the business of public health. They just want to make a buck, and they've done so brilliantly. But if, let's say, someone named Dr. Dasani had concocted a scheme to use clever packaging and well-made advertisements to wean our youth off sugared drinks and onto water, we'd be extolling his contribution to the nation.

I know, it still bothers you. It's just water after all. The stuff found in those bottles is roughly the same as what comes from our kitchen faucets. Why not buy a reusable plastic or aluminum bottle, fill it, and take it with you? Or why not just use water bubblers?

Because it won't happen. Yes, there are a handful who will truck their own reusable containers, but not a lot. As for those water fountains: If you can find them, they're likely broken. Even if not, they generally deliver a tepid drink from a spigot flecked with the drool of previous users. No, thanks.

Sure, we should all recycle no matter what we're drinking. But when people grab an Aquafina from the shelves instead of a Mountain Dew, that's one less sugary drink they'll be consuming. Instead of decrying those clever purveyors of water as modern-day charlatans, let's urge them onward. If marketers could persuade everyone to make bottled water their beverage of choice, we'd all be better off.

Tom Keane is a regular contributor to the Globe Magazine. E-mail him at tomkeane@globe.com.