

Op-Ed

Turn off the Tap on Bottled Water

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The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's June 24th front-page article on the economic value of the Great Lakes correctly suggests that regional water resources can remove much of our rust belt poverty, but misses the boat by endorsing the bottled water industry.

As an attendee of the business-oriented water symposium at Pier Wisconsin the article covered, I heard a lot of excitement about keeping jobs in our region and developing "wet industries" that can take advantage of our prime natural asset: Lake Michigan.

However, bottled water is not just another way to capitalize on our proximity to Lake Michigan. It is an error to equate Coca-Cola's Dasani water with Miller Brewing's fine fermented beverages.

For Dasani, water is the product, while for Miller, water is one ingredient incorporated into a final product. The difference might appear subtle and legalistic, but it could be the difference between exporting jobs and environmental protections and building thriving communities around the Great Lakes.

Bottled water is the most familiar form of privatizing and exporting water in bulk. We think bottled water is innocuous because we see it everywhere. But ask people if they want to see a pipeline built or tanker trucks lined up to ship water to Arizona to keep their golf courses green and you'll get an angry "no" in response.

It is important to realize that there is no meaningful difference between bulk exports of water using plastic bottles, or tankers and pipelines because the impact is the same: a complete taking of water out of the Great Lakes, most of which will not be returned. This stands in contrast to water uses in the basin that are just that – uses – where water is then returned back to the original water body.

And once you turn on the tap, legal rules protecting interstate and international commerce make it very hard to turn that tap off.

With global consumption of water doubling every 20 years, water scarcity is becoming an ever increasing reality - - the 'oil' of the 21st century - - throughout the world.

A handful of multinational corporations are capitalizing on this scarcity by amassing control of water resources in a growing, \$1 trillion dollar industry. These companies are doing this by taking water free of charge out of its natural state and shipping it via plastic bottles, tankers, pipelines, and water bags to sell in other places.

And with the export of water goes jobs - - precisely not what southeastern Wisconsin and rest of the state wants.

The Great Lakes contain 20% of the world's fresh surface water. Wisconsin and the other Great Lakes states and Canadian provinces control a valuable and vulnerable resource. Deciding how to manage this asset will impact the region's economic strength, public health, and basic rights.

Let's close the drain on the Great Lakes and not allow exports of our water by Coca-Cola/Dasani, Nestle/Perrier, or any of the other water barons of this century.