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Final Book Review

**Bottled and Sold: The Story Behind Our Obsession With Bottled Water**

Author Peter Gleick breaks down humanities obsession with the consumption of bottled water; Although it is available worldwide one in four bottles is consumed in the US, where the focus of his book primarily lays. He discusses how the businesses use scare tactics such as historical illnesses and contamination of public water supplies to build support for their product along with clever advertising. In addition, he finds true cost of bottled water and shows that it may not be as safe and convenient as we are lead to believe. While discussing these topics and more, he is able to relate today’s consumerism to past events and somewhat show where it is headed.

Although the primary purpose of the writing was to provide the truth about the convenient commodity to the public, there is a deeper underlying message from the author. He attempts to persuade people to act in a more responsible manner by showing the shortcomings of the product instead of the environmental impacts of what the product causes. He begins by stating the astronomical number of bottles consumed per minute by people worldwide. From here he asks what the environmental impacts are. Many people would assume the big issue comes from disposal of the refuse, but he instead pushes a focus on the other end of the spectrum, manufacturing. Hard facts such as three liters of petroleum are needed to manufacture 1 kilo of plastic needed for about 30 bottles are thrown around, but most readers cannot relate to this. He also shows how much water is needed for the plastic manufacturing and the purification process for the water itself. This is used to show that by the time the bottle reaches your doorstep, it is no longer as cheap and convenient as you would expect!

Gleick knows that telling someone how bad something is for the environment will not affect their habits. He decided to use fear to persuade people in the same manner he claims that the bottled water companies do to grow their user base. In order to do this he creates personally relatable arguments throughout the entire process. The first introduction to the issue grabs your attention and makes you question what exactly what people are consuming when using the product. He states the following:

“Corporate Accountability International, an advocacy group that runs an aggressive public campaign against bottled water, tells us, “Water bottling is one of the least regulated industries in the U.S.—much less regulated than our public tap water. Scientific studies even show that bottled water is no safer than tap water, and can sometimes be less safe, containing elevated levels of arsenic, bacteria, and other contaminants.”

Now instead of pushing the environmental consequences he is pushing personal consequences to your health and well-being by using this product. This method, in my opinion, is ingenious and it definitely catches the reader’s attention. Later in the book, he elaborates further saying:

“… In addition to benzene, bottles have been found to contain mold, sodium hydroxide, kerosene, styrene, algae, yeast, tetrahydrofuran, sand, fecal coliforms and other forms of bacteria, elevated chlorine, “filth,” glass particles, sanitizer, and, in my very favorite example, crickets.”

Many people, myself included do not know what some of these contaminants are, but seeing terms such as fecal, kerosine, mold, etc paint a grim and disgusting picture of the product that these companies tout as being better than city water and healthier than other sources of water!

Finally, the author convinces us of his stance by showing how little the government and companies truly care about the quality of the water. He shows several instances where recalls were enacted, but yet could not be found on the FDA website without several increasingly specific requests by contacting them directly. It is also shown that most recalls happen months after the fact, when much of the product has already been consumed. He also shows, in the example below, that the companies are not concerned with the customer’s well being.

“The first reaction by Perrier was to deny that there was any health risk. “A cup of non-freeze-dried coffee contains more benzene,” a company representative told the Economist magazine. They then attributed the problem to a faulty machine serving only the North American market, and as public pressure grew they began recalling bottles sold in the United States.”

This perfectly pushes his agenda of cutting back on bottled water usage. By painting not only the product, but the manufacturer of the product in a bad light, readers will be that much more likely to change their stance and ways, especially after reading what may lurk from within the water being consumed. All in all, through creative phrasings and psychological manipulation through shocking statistics, I believe the author is trying to cut the total environmental impact of bottled water through the use of the same methods he condemns these companies for using. This is not only a very intelligent approach, but it is extremely effective.

After reading this book, I had to sit back and rethink my consumer decisions. I have been brainwashed into believing that the faint chlorinated and fluorinated taste of tap water meant that it was full of impurities and bad for your health. After reading this, I have concluded that I was incorrect with this stance and I am now in favor of what the author was attempting to convey. It was shown in several studies the author mentions where tap water contained less arsenic, bromide, and fecal matter than their bottled counterparts. It was also mentioned that many bottled waters are in fact just bottled municipal water that I already have access to through a spigot. One of the greatest disappointments came from the following quote:

“But even U.S. regulations concerning bottled water, because they are neither sufficiently strict nor adequately enforced, sometimes offer no greater consumer protection in the United States than if there were no regulations at all.”

I always figured that this being a food item was held to strict standards, as it turns out, this is not the case, and many times the standards are not checked regularly allowing for a wide variance in water quality and potentially allowing problems to slip through. I completely agree with the author in that bottled water needs to be significantly reduced, not only for environmental purposes, but for the well being of the consumer!

This book changed my opinion to the point where I no longer use bottled water and in fact have purchased a personal water filter. I do not care for the taste of our local tap water, but the filter helps resolve this issue. When I had friends over they asked for bottled water, but I provided them with filtered unknown to them. After telling them what they were drinking, and I relayed this newfound knowledge, I believe several of them will also be converting to tap water.

Overall I believe that this book was definitely an extremely useful read. Although it pushes moral and personal health issues and only glances over the direct effects of using bottled water, I believe it still accomplished its goal and probably does better than it would if environmental impacts alone had been discussed. Not only will it change how consumers act in the store with regard to purchasing these type of products, but it will open people’s eyes to the impact that modern consumerism has on not only themselves, but the people they know. I would highly recommend this book to others, it will definitely stick with them in the long term.