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Bottled water taxing ecosystem

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Washington - Bottled water consumption, which has more than doubled globally in the last six years, is a natural resource that is heavily taxing the world's ecosystem, according to a new United States study.

"Even in areas where tap water is safe to drink, demand for bottled water is increasing, producing unnecessary garbage and consuming vast quantities of energy," according to Emily Arnold, author of the study published by the Earth Policy Institute, a Washington-based environmental group.

Arnold said although in the industrial world bottled water is often no healthier than tap water, it can end up costing 10 000 times more.

"At as much as \$2.50 per litre, bottled water costs more than gasoline," the study says.

It added that the US was the largest consumer of bottled water, with Americans drinking 26 billion litres in 2004, or about 25cl glass per person every day.

Mexico was the second largest consumer at 18 billion litres followed by China and Brazil at 12 billion litres each.

Disposing bottles a risk

In terms of consumption per person, Italians came first at nearly 184 litres, or more than two glasses a day, followed by Mexico and the United Arab Emirates with 169 and 164 litres per person respectively.

Belgium and France follow close behind and Spain ranks sixth.

The study said demand for bottled water soared in developing countries between 1999 and 2004 with consumption tripling in India and more than doubling in China during that period.

That has translated into massive costs in packaging the water, usually in plastic bottles made of polyethylene terephthalate (PET) which is derived from crude oil, and then transporting it by boat, train or on land.

"Making bottles to meet Americans' demand for bottled water requires more than 1.5 million barrels of oil annually, enough to fuel about 100 000 US cars for a year," according to the study. "Worldwide, some 2.7 million tons of plastic are used to bottle water each year."

Once the water is consumed, disposing the plastic bottles poses an environmental risk.

'No marked benefits'

The study, citing the Container Recycling Institute, said 86% of plastic water bottles in the US end up as garbage and those buried can take up to 1 000 years to biodegrade.

In addition, about 40% of the PET bottles deposited for recycling in the US in 2004 ended up being shipped to China.

The study warned that the rapid growth in the industry has also ironically led to water shortages in some areas, including India where bottling of Dasani water and other drinks by the Coca-Cola

company has caused shortages in more than 50 villages.

It said while consumers tend to link bottled water with healthy living, tap water can be just as healthy and is subject to more stringent regulations than bottled water in many regions, including Europe and the US.

"In fact, roughly 40% of bottled water begins as tap water," the study says. "Often the only difference is added minerals that have no marked health benefits.

